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Re-visioning Myth: Feminist Strategies in Contemporary Theatre

by

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre Studies**

**University of Warwick,
Department of Theatre Studies**

January 2000

CONTENTS

	page
Acknowledgements	i
Declaration	i
Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
I The lie of the land	5
1. Definitions	5
(i) Myth	5
(ii) Re-vision	10
2. Myth, theatre and the feminist public sphere	16
(i) The feminist public sphere	17
(ii) Feminist theatre and the feminist public sphere	22
(iii) Re-visioning myth in feminist theatre	23
3. Design of the thesis	27
II Social dramas	30
1. Introduction	30
2. Leaving the labyrinth: Hella Haasse's <i>A Thread in the Dark</i>	37
3. "Tremate, tremate, le streghe sono tornate": Franca Rame's <i>The Same Old Story</i> and <i>Medea</i>	47
4. "And she stopped the world": Sarah Daniels' <i>Neaptide</i>	60
III Disruptions	68
1. Introduction	68
2. Nothing sacred: Maureen Duffy's <i>Rites</i>	77
3. 'I don't know what got into me': Caryl Churchill and David Lan's <i>A Mouthful of Birds</i>	90
4. The noise of myth: Timberlake Wertenbaker's <i>The Love of the Nightingale</i>	104
IV Tyrannies	118
1. Introduction	118
2. "Sleep, sleep, woman-in-a-trance": Andrée Chedid's <i>The Goddess Lar, or Centuries of Women</i>	125
3. Encounters with monsters: Angela Carter's <i>The Company of Wolves</i> and <i>Vampirella</i>	141
V Other countries	167
1. Introduction	167
2. Landscapes of myth and theatre: Serena Sartori and Renata Coluccini's <i>Demeter Beneath the Sand</i>	171
3. Journeying to the heart: Hélène Cixous' <i>The Name of Oedipus: Song of the Forbidden Body</i>	184
Conclusion	204
Bibliography	210

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Geraldine Cousin and Franc Chamberlain for their advice and encouragement during the preparation of this thesis.

Declaration

At the time of submission, none of the material contained in this thesis has been published elsewhere. However, the chapter section 'Leaving the Labyrinth: Hella Haasse's *A Thread in the Dark*' forms the basis of an article which has been accepted by the journal *Modern Drama* and which is likely to be published in 2000.

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Abstract

This thesis examines the strategy of re-visioning myth within contemporary European feminist theatre, a strategy which has proved popular over time and across cultures but which has received insufficient critical attention. This study seeks to fill that gap by offering a framework through which this practice can be considered, exploring the diverse motivations of individual playwrights, and evaluating the achievements of particular plays in context. Twelve case studies are included, grouped together to demonstrate a variety of approaches to re-visioning ranging from utilisation of myth as pretext for examination of social issues, to an apparent abandonment of contemporary reality for a utopian otherworld. However, it is argued first that mythical, social and psychological strands remain intertwined, and second that the diversity of approaches reflects the importance for feminist theatre of selecting strategies to meet specific needs, and that these strategies can thus be viewed as complementary rather than in conflict. Chapter One introduces selected critical perspectives on myth, re-visioning and feminist theatre, framing these within Rita Felski's model of the feminist counter-public sphere. Chapter Two discusses plays by Hella Haasse, Franca Rame and Sarah Daniels, which examine myth as ideological narrative. Plays by Maureen Duffy, Caryl Churchill and David Lan, and Timberlake Wertenbaker, considered in Chapter Three, investigate myths of female violence. Chapter Four looks at plays by Andrée Chedid and Angela Carter which use myth to confront women's complicity in maintaining the status quo. Plays by Serena Sartori, Renata Coluccini and Hélène Cixous, discussed in Chapter Five, offer psychological investigations into women's relationships with myth, language and power. The thesis concludes with a summary of the research findings, and assesses their significance.

Introduction

She prayed for a cue. Uncle Philip read out:

“Leda attempts to flee her heavenly visitant but his beauty and majesty bear her to the ground.”

“Well, I suppose I must lie down,” she thought and, kicking aside shells, went down on her knees. Like fate or the clock, on came the swan, its feet going splat, splat, splat. She thought of the horse of Troy, also made of hollow wood; if she did not act her part well, a trapdoor in the swan’s side might open and an armed host of pigmy Uncle Philips, all clockwork, might rush out and savage her. This possibility seemed real and awful. All her laughter was snuffed out. She was hallucinated; she felt herself not herself, wrenched from her own personality, watching this whole fantasy from another place; and, in this staged fantasy, anything was possible. Even that the swan, the mocked-up swan, might assume reality itself and rape this girl in a blizzard of white feathers.¹

This extract from Angela Carter’s novel *The Magic Toyshop* presents the orphaned teenager, Melanie, as reluctant performer in her Uncle Philip’s ‘Grand Theatrical Entertainment’: an enactment of the rape of Leda by Zeus in the form of a swan. Philip is a toymaker, and his puppet theatre, which stars his handmade, lifesize marionettes, his pride and joy; he has conferred upon his young niece the unwanted honour of performing alongside these creations, although in his eyes her clumsy humanity causes her to appear to disadvantage by comparison.

The passage I quote seems an appropriate introduction to this thesis, which deals with ways in which women have used theatre as a means to examine both representations of the feminine within mythology, and the powerful impact of these on a wider cultural consciousness. The narrative of Leda and the swan, drawn from classical mythology, illustrates one familiar version of gender relations: the (mortal) woman at the mercy of (immortal) male power. Other, similar stories may come to mind: perhaps the god Apollo’s pursuit of Daphne (who in that instance is protected from rape by being turned into a tree), or Persephone’s abduction by Hades, god of the underworld. Of course, the role of the feminine within mythology is not always restricted to that of helpless victim. There are also the strong, murderous women, such as Medea and Clytemnestra, just as in classic fairy tale the passive Sleeping Beauties and Cinderellas are

¹ Carter, Angela (1981) *The Magic Toyshop*: London, Virago, 165-66.

counterbalanced by vengeful fairies and wicked stepmothers, their darker, shadow selves. These sets of characters illustrate the limited versions of femininity seemingly available to women within these closely related genres, the two extremes of virtue and vice. Admittedly, there are some exceptions. Antigone, for example, is a strong-willed woman prepared to stand alone against the state, in defence of what she believes to be right; she is, however, punished for her actions by death.

Whether these diverse representations of femininity are perceived as 'positive' or 'negative', is, to some degree, an irrelevance. The greater problem - one clearly identified with by many women who choose to retell or rewrite mythological narratives - is the sense that all of these models are patriarchally constructed, that these are characters trapped within stories not of their making. Carter's depiction of this staging of 'Leda and the Swan' illustrates the point clearly. Melanie is forced to play the role of victim, as the swan advances "like fate or the clock". The rape is not an inevitable act of the god, however, but the violent performance of masculine fantasy. As Melanie recognises, she is facing her uncle in the form of the swan; the myth, like the marionette, is a vehicle through which he exercises an abusive power.

As Melanie observes, the puppet swan is in many ways a ludicrous object, bordering on the grotesque, rather than the creature of "beauty and majesty" Philip describes. In this way, Carter mocks the arrogance of its maker, debunks the pretensions of the myth; the noble swan is firmly earthed, through its awkward clockwork tread: "splat, splat, splat". It is worth noting that Melanie's first response, at the sight of the swan, is an impulse towards laughter. Indeed, ridicule, a refusal to take seriously these symbolic representations of patriarchal power, can be an effective form of feminist resistance. This is not to imply that such a strategy is easy to follow through; Melanie's laughter is quickly "snuffed out", for although the swan is a fake, the terror is real. The sense of loss of identity that she experiences at this moment vividly illustrates her wish to reject the Leda role, and at the same time serves as a subconscious strategy of self-preservation. In achieving mental distance from the scene, she manages to cope with her objectification and humiliation; the price of doing so, however, is to see herself as

her uncle sees her, deprived of subjecthood.

The scene also raises the question of the options available for women in theatre, as well as in myth. Before playing Leda, Melanie has portrayed 'Wood Nymph' and 'Bride' for her uncle, other ritualised feminine roles. She is instructed to be as puppet-like as possible, to subdue her individuality, her humanity and her sexuality (he has complained earlier that her "tits are too big"²), and to obey the commands of the male author-director-puppeteer. She fears the consequences should she not "act her part well", in a context where 'acting' has a double meaning. As Leda, she must play out her assigned role of vain resistance and ultimate submission to the god; as a woman, she must act appropriately, which is to say in accordance with the will of the authoritative father-figure. Within this scenario, it seems that Melanie, as actress, has few options; in terms of Carter's novel as a whole, however, she does eventually achieve a greater level of autonomy. Yet, as Carter hints, within a staged fantasy anything is possible. What if 'anything' does not imply simply further patriarchal abuses, but as yet unimagined strategies of female resistance? The re-visionings of myth I explore in this study, diverse as they are, are united in just such an investigation; their authors refuse to accept conventional limitations on women's choices as characters in myth, or as practitioners in the theatre.

On one level, all feminist theatre deals with the re-visioning of myth, given that a key motivation for the work is the need to interrogate models of femininity and female behaviour which support, and are supported by, a patriarchal ideology. In this study, however, I focus on myth in the more specific sense of traditional narrative associated with a specific cultural community, illustrative of the dominant beliefs of that community. In examining women playwrights' treatment of myth, then, I deal with reinterpretations, retellings and subversions of these stories. It is a broad subject, and in tackling it, I have found it necessary to begin by exploring ideas around myths, and around the practice of feminist re-vision, before commencing my examination of the case studies themselves. Furthermore, given that the plays I include range from those which use myth to comment explicitly and critically on their contemporary social

² *Ibid*, 143.

context, to others which seem to treat myth as a channel into a psychological realm depicted as outside 'real time', I have felt it appropriate to bring fairly diverse theoretical perspectives to bear upon my discussion. This breadth of focus is intentional and, in my view, desirable, since my aim is to draw attention to a specific and recurrent strategy within feminist playwriting, whilst at the same time revealing diversity of implementation and motivation. I have sought to avoid over-fragmentation, however, by employing an overarching critical model, drawn from Rita Felski, of a feminist counter-public sphere; use of this model assists the location of fairly contrasting theatre practices within a wider feminist project.

In this study, I look in detail at twelve plays. I have, of course, read and seen many others during the period of my research. In making choices for selection, I have been guided by personal preference as much as by the wish to illustrate an argument. Indeed, some of the examples I include have been considered problematic in feminist terms, for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, I have found them stimulating and provocative, and in stirring up debate they are arguably more productive than those which simply support a feminist party line (if one exists). In the organisation of chapters, similarly, I have tried to avoid any sense of compartmentalisation. The groupings are intended to reveal shared themes and strategies, without masking the idiosyncrasies of individual authors and the specificities of contexts of production and reception. In many ways, I hope that the reader is stimulated to imagine alternative modes of structuring and to wish for the inclusion of additional examples. I am very aware that women's engagement with mythology extends well beyond the material I discuss, just as their use of theatre investigates myth, not simply as story, but as territory. The extract from *The Magic Toyshop* with which I opened this thesis may focus on one specific staging of myth, and the patriarchal framing of women within it, but anyone familiar with the novel will be aware that the whole is shot through with myths and re-visionings; this is not one narrative, but an interweaving of many. Likewise, the plays I discuss can be seen to overlap. Viewed in this way, the contemporary world becomes increasingly overlaid with imagined alternatives, representing collectively a staged fantasy in which, as Carter says, it seems that anything is possible.

CHAPTER I The lie of the land

DEFINITIONS

(i) Myth

Whilst this thesis engages specifically with feminist treatments of myth within theatre, it will readily be apparent that the study of myth potentially leads in any number of different directions, for example towards approaches drawn from history, theology, philosophy, anthropology, the natural sciences, literature and psychoanalysis. Such diverse modes of analysis inevitably emphasise different aspects of myth and mythology, and as a result it seems unlikely that any universally satisfactory definition can be given. For the purposes of this study it will be more helpful, therefore, if I propose a working definition - or rather, definitions. First, as David Leeming notes, the English word “myth” is derived from the Greek *mythos*, meaning word or story.¹ If a myth is a particular kind of story, a mythology can be understood as a collection of stories belonging to a particular cultural group. Typically, these stories are recognised as ‘sacred’ in that for the culture in which they are initially produced, they appear to have a religious significance. Further, these stories can be seen to share certain characteristics, to possess ‘family resemblances’. For example, as Carolyne Larrington states, myths frequently feature anthropomorphic and theriomorphic divine figures, heroes or animals², and are set outside of historical time in “primal or eschatological time”³ or in the supernatural world; in some cases they may deal with comings and goings between the supernatural world and a recognisable world of human history.

In defining myth, however, I do not draw a hard-and-fast distinction between what is normally termed ‘myth’, and what is normally termed ‘fairy tale’. Whilst some have argued that myth preceded the folk and fairy tale⁴ and had a more sacred function than

¹ Leeming, David (1990) *The World of Myth*: New York, Oxford University Press, 3.

² Larrington, Carolyne ed. (1992) *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*: London, Pandora, xi.

³ Don Cupitt (1982) quoted in Coupe, Laurence (1997) *Myth*: London, Routledge, 5.

⁴ Jack Zipes quotes Mircea Eliade as firmly espousing this belief. See Zipes, Jack (1994) *Fairy Tale as Myth: Myth as Fairy Tale*: Kentucky, University Press of Kentucky, 1-3.

the secular narratives, this version of history is not universally shared. It is clear, however, that myths and folk tales blend very early in oral and literary traditions, and it is difficult to tell them apart. Larrington also notes the impossibility of a clear-cut distinction, for just as “many myths incorporate folk-tale motifs, so many stories are simple narratives which happen to have a god as a protagonist.”⁵ Certainly, once myths are separated from a context which held them as sacred, there seems little to distinguish them from the apparently secular stories; conversely, many fairy tales - such as *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Red Riding Hood* - have surely been ‘mythologised’ within the western world.⁶ What is more important for this study is the status held by these genres as bodies of tales imaginatively reflecting and reinforcing the dominant beliefs of a culture. Thus, although the majority of examples I shall use refer to what is generally regarded as myth, I want to hold on to the breadth and potential inclusiveness of this term, so that the fairy tale too can be included where appropriate.

Stories have traditionally been used as a way of explaining those things which cannot otherwise easily be understood. One way of responding to bodies of mythology, then, has been to interpret them as imaginative, prescientific attempts to explain natural phenomena.⁷ However, myths are also a means of dealing with that which may be difficult to accept emotionally, rather than on a cognitive level; the countless myths relating to social rites of passage are an example of this. A myth can be studied in terms both of its specificity, and its commonality. The narrative of a myth offers a set of apparent meanings, but beyond this, further subtextual meanings may be suggested; the similarities identified between the mythic narratives of diverse cultures would seem to validate a move to look beyond the specificities of individual tales. Larrington notes, however, that given this sense that the narrative of a myth has a subtextual meaning -

⁵ Larrington ed. (1992) *op.cit.*, xii.

⁶ Zipes (1994) *op.cit.*, 5.

⁷ In some periods, for example, myths were thought to contain information which if decoded would unlock the secrets of alchemy. Attention focused closely on mythical ‘transformations’, seeking to interpret these in terms of the transformation of metals. According to K.K. Ruthven, the last major attempt to read ancient mythology in this way was by Antoine Pernety in his *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique* of 1787. Ruthven, K.K. (1979) *Myth*: London, Methuen, 15.

accessible to the culture which created it - analysts may be tempted to see this as the tale's 'real meaning'. To follow this path could be problematic, for, as the organisation of Larrington's own edition makes clear, any such interpretation must be acknowledged as part of a complex web of meaning, just as any individual myth is drawn, at specific historical moments, from a wider body of mythology.⁸

Any discussion of myth's potential as bearer of knowledge must acknowledge the influence of psychoanalytic thought on this subject. Whilst this is far too wide an area to which to do justice here, it will be helpful to mention at this point one or two ideas which have particular relevance for this study. Both Freud and Jung emphasised the significance of dreams, as is well-known, and continually encountered symbols and patterns common to mythic traditions in the dream imagery related to them by patients. For Freud the Oedipus myth, most famously, provided a key to understanding psychic drives, and it is this narrative which is at the centre of his *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).⁹ Whilst Freud read dream imagery as an expression of the repressed desires of the individual unconscious, Jung added another layer of interpretation; in his model, beyond the level of the personal unconscious (which was susceptible to 'Freudian' analysis) lay the collective unconscious, which contained patterns of psychic perception common to all humanity: the archetypes. Jung distinguished between the archetype as such, which is seen as a pattern of instinctive behaviour, and archetypal images, which are the manifestations of these behaviours in myth, literature and art. Studying archetypal imagery in dreams was thus the key both to understanding the unconscious mind of the patient, but also - and for Jung, more importantly - to gaining knowledge of 'essential' human experience and perception.¹⁰

Jung's archetypal psychology (or analytical psychology, as he himself termed it) has been highly influential and has much in it that other practitioners (from a variety of disciplines) have found appealing. As Laurence Coupe has noted, Jung's approach

⁸ Larrington ed. (1992) *op.cit.*, xi.

⁹ I consider Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus myth further in Chapter Five, in relation to Hélène Cixous' play *The Name of Oedipus: Song of the Forbidden Body*.

¹⁰ Jung, Carl Gustav (1973) *Man and His Symbols*: New York, Laurel, and (1995) *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*: London, Fontana.

resists the Enlightenment faith in the power of reason and foregrounds the power of myths, which cannot be explained away as relics of an inferior understanding but should be valued as “original revelations of the preconscious psyche”.¹¹ This idea of revelation has been important to many artists, who have been inspired by Jung, directly and indirectly, to use myth and dream as a key source in creative work. Indeed, Jung’s theories of myth and the psyche are also, potentially, very relevant to the theatre; his writings emphasise identity as something flexible and improvised, and show mythic life as a matter of role-playing as much as authenticity.¹² In addition, he does not propose abandonment to the forces of the unconscious (or to any individual ‘role’), but rather advocates a condition of equilibrium.¹³ However, despite its appeal, Jung’s approach is also problematic, not least in his belief that the truths of archetypal knowledge, made manifest in mythic imagery, transcended the specificities of, for example, race or gender.¹⁴ Tension between the universal and the particular is, however, an issue which will be debated throughout this study.

This identification of the problems attached to any quest for the ‘real’ or ‘true’ meaning of a myth leads us back to what seems to be an altogether different understanding of the term itself. Far from a sacred story, a myth also commonly refers to that which is *false*,

¹¹ From Jung’s ‘The Psychology of the Child Archetype’, quoted in Segal, Robert ed. (1990) *Jung on Mythology*. London, Routledge, 3.

¹² I consider Jung’s theories of myth in relation to the theatre further in Chapter Five, in my discussion of the Teatro Cooperativo del Sole’s *Demeter Beneath the Sand*.

¹³ Jung’s belief in the importance of equilibrium is also reflected in his theory of the *animal/animus* and principles of *Eros* and *Logos*. These ideas have, of course, been highly contentious; while some feminist thinkers (e.g. Bettina Knapp) have adopted and developed Jung’s argument for a psyche which balances masculine and feminine principles, others (e.g. Diane Purkiss) have considered that Jung’s notions of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are themselves based on limited and traditional perceptions of gender; still others (e.g. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément) have drawn on Jung’s work in proposing a radical bisexuality with the power to disrupt gender norms. Knapp, Bettina (1989) *Women in Twentieth-Century Literature: A Jungian View*. Baltimore, Pennsylvania University Press; Diane Purkiss (1992) ‘Women’s Rewriting of Myth’: in Larrington (1992) *op.cit.*, 441-57; Cixous, Hélène & Clément, Catherine (1986), trans. Wing, Betsy, *The Newly Born Woman*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.

¹⁴ Coupe (1997) *op.cit.*, 144-5.

an ‘old wives’ tale’¹⁵ - in other words, to a generally accepted belief which is ultimately unsubstantiated by fact. As Marina Warner notes, “the word myth [...] invites dissent, implying delusion and falsehood.”¹⁶ Warner acknowledges that in her own work she is indebted to Roland Barthes’ famous collection of essays published in 1957, *Mythologies* (although that is not to say that she accepts his conclusions¹⁷). Barthes’ study of this subject was prompted by his growing frustration at the media’s constant blurring of “Nature” and “History”, such that what was surely determined by the latter was continually dressed up as the former, as ‘reality’:

I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there.¹⁸

For Barthes myth thus serves as a potent term to refer to that which is “falsely obvious”.¹⁹

In this study, my definition of myth embodies these two important meanings, and fully acknowledges the tension between them: on the one hand, a myth is a traditional, possibly sacred, story ascribed to a particular cultural community, reflecting that culture’s deep-rooted beliefs about the nature of the world; on the other hand, a myth is that which is false masquerading as truth, dressed up as common knowledge to hide its actual status as an ideologically-charged narrative. Such an opposition of ‘true’ set against ‘false’ of course only addresses part of the problem. For example, ‘truth’ in what sense? Few contemporary studies of myth would adopt a Euhemeristic

¹⁵ Whilst “old wives’ tale” is now a little-used phrase and one generally interpreted as disparaging in its alignment of women with gossip and tittle-tattle, it is also a term which feminist folklorists have sought to resurrect, seeing it as testimony to women’s importance within traditions of oral storytelling. See for instance Bottigheimer, Ruth ed. (1986) *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion and Paradigm*: Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, and Warner, Marina (1994) *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairytales and Their Tellers*: London, Chatto & Windus.

¹⁶ Warner, Marina (1994) *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time (The Reith Lectures 1994)*: London, Vintage, xiii.

¹⁷ Warner sees Barthes as writing “what almost amounts to an exposé of myth”, showing how it is used to conceal political motives; her own view is, she says, “less pessimistic” as she believes that his method of ‘demystification’ can lead towards the collective and creative forming of new myths/stories for our times. *Ibid*, xiii-xiv.

¹⁸ Barthes, Roland (1989) *Mythologies*: London, Paladin, 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

approach²⁰ whereby narratives are considered meaningful in so far as they can be traced to actual historical events, constituting a form of 'para-history'. My emphasis in this thesis is rather on the systems of beliefs and values which myths can be seen to reflect, and to which they contribute. I will not focus on uncovering the meanings myths might have embodied for the communities which created and perpetuated them, although this is clearly a valuable area of investigation. Instead I ask, if it is true that those myths are in some form still a part of a contemporary cultural consciousness centuries later, how are they being used, by whom, and for what purposes?

(ii) Re-vision

The issue of the role of myth in the formation of consciousness has been one important area of investigation for feminist criticism. Although there is considerable diversity of approaches to the subject²¹, there are recurrent patterns. In an echo of the points I have raised above, feminism recognises the key function of myth in transmitting a culture's beliefs (and in story form, which makes them immediately accessible even to the youngest children), but argues that any claim made for myth as the embodiment of unchanging or *universal* truths must be treated with suspicion, as 'common knowledge' may well, in Barthes' terms, disguise ideological abuse. A central concern of feminist criticism has thus been to unmask the women of ancient mythologies, to look beyond supposedly archetypal images of the feminine to reveal how these, far from expressing timeless truths, are in fact heavily mediated by the values of patriarchal culture. Such a process could be regarded as one of revision/re-vision.

In her essay 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', Adrienne Rich defines "re-vision" as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction."²² This expresses the essence of the feminist re-

²⁰ This term derives from the ancient writer Euhemerus, whose *Sacred Document* (300BCE) claimed that Zeus was actually a Cretan man who was deified by his community in return for his heroism in battle. See Coupe (1997) *op.cit.*, 104.

²¹ A useful overview of key approaches to myth in feminist literary criticism is provided in Humm, Maggie (1994) *Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism*: London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 54-73.

²² Rich, Adrienne (1979) 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision': in Rich (1979) *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*: New York, Norton, 35.

visionary project: women must come to terms with old texts - and old myths - in order to explore the possibilities of creating new ones. As Rich explains,

[w]e need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.²³

This does not mean primarily that existing, canonised works must be rewritten and thus appropriated by feminism - and whether this is possible, even if desirable, is open to debate - but that (in this case) literary criticism is changed “from a closed conversation to an active dialogue”.²⁴

The notion of revision is also an important one for the critic and collector of fairy tales, Jack Zipes, whose work on the subject contains elements pertinent to this study.²⁵ In his examination of classic fairy tales and their metamorphoses in history, Zipes distinguishes between “duplication” and “revision”. The former process implies reproduction of an original; the latter offers a reexamination of it. In the case of the classic fairy tale, Zipes considers that to duplicate it is to reproduce a set pattern of ideas and images which reinforce a traditional way of seeing and believing; in Zipes’ view this is also an act which, incidentally, requires little imagination or skill. On the other hand, to revise a classic fairy tale is to create a new work which incorporates the critical and creative thinking of the new author, perhaps in recognition of a society’s altered tastes and demands. Importantly, however, Zipes reminds us that not all revisions are progressive, as “[r]evision for the sake of revision is not necessarily a change for the better or stimulating.”²⁶ In the nineteenth century, for example, fairy tales for children were carefully regulated and in many cases expurgated, sanitised and domesticated in order to make them ‘appropriate’ for young minds; this too was a process of revision, but one which many current critics of the genre - not least feminist critics - would like to challenge.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Judith Fetterley (1978) quoted in Eagleton, Mary (1996) *Working With Feminist Criticism*: Oxford, Blackwell 123.

²⁵ Zipes (1994) *op.cit.*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

Fundamental to the process of feminist re-vision, then, is the reexamination of texts²⁷ from a critical and creative perspective, to engage with them actively in order to identify the ways in which they define women and women's experience, and at key points to intervene and retell, reclaim and rename. Feminist approaches to the re-vision of myths can be seen to be centrally motivated by a desire to expose their ideological construction. However, an alternative emphasis has been to celebrate myth as - potentially, at least - a 'feminine sphere' and site of 'authentic' female experience; in order to reach this sphere, however, it is still necessary to peel away layers of 'false', i.e. (for feminists) patriarchal myth. This position is justified in a variety of ways. For example, some feminists have argued that matriarchy preceded patriarchy and that a reinterpretation of archaeological evidence, and of ancient goddess myths, proves the existence of early matriarchal societies. These goddess religions, it is suggested, were ultimately overtaken by Christianity, which distorted their tales and transformed their symbols into a new mythology stripped of female power. Elinor Gadon's *The Once and Future Goddess* (1991) is one important study of women's pre-history in this mode, offering an analysis of representations of the Goddess which is both diachronic and synchronic. Gadon asserts that Goddess religion, across different cultures, was "earth-centred, not heaven-centred, of this world not other-worldly, body-affirming not body-denying, holistic not dualistic" and aligns these values with the feminine. The subsequent ascendancy of the male God is seen as the ascendancy of patriarchy, and the suppression of Goddess religion and the feminine as a necessary part of this reversal. Gadon's project is the reclaiming of the Goddess - for men as well as women - not in order to idealise/idolise women, but to embrace the values which the Goddess is felt to symbolise: primarily, a spirituality which is earth-centred and ecologically aware, and a sexuality which is enriched by the resacralising of women's bodies and the wider transformation of social relations.²⁸ However, Gadon's study, like other related approaches, is not easy to read as the uncovering of historical truth. There is after all no conclusive evidence for an originary matriarchal society, although neither are there sufficient grounds entirely to disprove this theory. Where Gadon's work is more valuable, in my view, is in offering a persuasive and resonant counter-myth.

²⁷ I am using this term in its widest sense.

²⁸ Gadon, Elinor (1991) *The Once and Future Goddess*: Wellingborough, Aquarian Press, xi-xv.

Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (first published in 1978) is an earlier, and highly influential, examination of women's history.²⁹ Whereas Gadon's study focuses heavily on visual evidence (such as wall-painting, sculpture, tapestry), Daly's main emphasis is verbal. In *Gyn/Ecology* and in other writings, Daly offers not merely a radical feminist analysis of past and present beliefs and practices, but an imaginative reworking of "man-made language" as part of the creation of a vital, female-centred future culture. A recognition of the interrelatedness of myth and language is central to Daly's approach, as she asserts that patriarchy "perpetuates its deception" through both:

[O]ne often hears: "It's only a myth (or story, or fairy tale, or legend)." The cliché belittles the power of myth. The child who is fed tales such as *Snow White* is not told that the tale itself is a poisonous apple, and the Wicked Queen (her mother-teacher), having herself been drugged by the same deadly diet throughout her lifetime (death-time), is unaware of her venomous part in the patriarchal plot.³⁰

The strategy advocated by Daly is two-fold: on the one hand, the deconstruction/destruction of patriarchal myths; on the other, the discovery and creation of gynocentric myths, "stories arising from the experiences of Crones"³¹ which convey primary messages about women's pre-history and female-identified power.³² From this it should be clear that Daly is not concerned to 'prove' that every patriarchal myth has its antecedent in a gynocentric one - although such investigations may be valuable - but to develop a radical new women-centred mythology which offers a creative interweaving of pasts, presents and imagined futures.

The last example I will give here of a feminist approach to the re-vision of myth is that

²⁹ Daly, Mary (1991) *Gyn/Ecology*: London, The Women's Press.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 44.

³¹ "Crone" is defined by Daly as: "Great Hag of History, long-lasting one; Survivor of the perpetual witchcraze of patriarchy, whose status is determined not by chronological age, but by Crone-logical considerations; one who has Survived early stages of the Otherworld Journey and who therefore has Dis-covered depths of Courage, Strength and Wisdom in her Self"; examples given of Crones include Harriet Tubman, rescuer of slaves, and Ding Ling, 20th century Chinese feminist activist and author. Daly, Mary & Caputi, Jane (1988) *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*: London, The Women's Press, 114.

³² Daly (1991) *op.cit.*, 47.

of the French writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous. I include her both for the wide influence of her work, and for her interest in and practice of theatre as a powerful medium of communication. (I comment on her work for the theatre later in this chapter and in more detail in Chapter Five.) Although Cixous' writing regularly makes mythical references - her essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976) is one well-known example³³ - it is in 'Sorties' (1975) that she offers one of her most detailed and sustained examinations of the role of myth in the formation of cultural consciousness.³⁴ Cixous begins this essay by identifying sets of hierarchical oppositions which have structured western thought and governed its political practices, for example Activity/Passivity, Culture/Nature, Father/Mother and Head/Heart, and moves on to demonstrate how in each opposition, one term is culturally privileged; within this dualistic structure, the feminine is repressed and woman becomes the 'Other' to man. As a combative strategy Cixous advocates 'mining' the structures of patriarchy, indeed recognises that this is already being done:

We are living in an age where the conceptual foundation of an ancient culture is in the process of being undermined by millions of a species of mole [...] never known before.
When they wake up from among the dead, from among words, from among laws.³⁵

Like Daly, Cixous believes structures of language to be central to the maintenance of patriarchal power. The two critics employ similar strategies of weaving, spinning word-play, but their terms are different³⁶; in Cixous' case, the language strategy she advocates for women has become known, notoriously, as *écriture féminine*.

Far more has been said and written about *écriture féminine* than can be summarised

³³ Cixous, Hélène (1975a) 'The Laugh of the Medusa': in Marks, Elaine & de Courtivron, Isabelle eds. (1980) *New French Feminisms*: Brighton, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 254-64.

³⁴ Cixous (1975b) 'Sorties': in Cixous & Clément (1986) *op.cit.*, 63-132.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁶ A key term for Daly is "Sparkling", defined as "speaking with tongues of Fire; igniting the divine Spark in women; lighting the Fires of Female Friendship; encouraging women to become sister Pyrotechnists; building the Fire that is fueled by Fury - the Fire that warms and lights the place where we can Spin and Weave tapestries of Crone-centred creation." Daly & Caputi (1988) *op.cit.*, 165.

here.³⁷ Principally, however, it is a term for women's writing arising from French feminist theory. It refers to a form of writing/discourse which is closer to the body and the emotions, elements which are repressed within the symbolic order. Because women are similarly marginalised, Cixous argues, they have access to this form of writing and through it can reveal what is normally kept 'secret' and find a space for *jouissance*³⁸ – a totality of pleasure. For Cixous' own form of *écriture féminine* a journey into the territory of myth is essential and inevitable, for several reasons. First, on a formal level, the associative patterning of interlinked stories, memories and images provides an alternative to the linear logic of patriarchal discourse. Secondly, myths influentially reinforce the repressive dualistic structures of western thought, and must thus be challenged. Thirdly, once myths are undermined by feminine "moles", they can be made to reveal hidden truths, authentic female voices previously buried deep:

We have been frozen in our place between two terrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. It would be enough to make half the world break out laughing, if it were not still going on. [...] All you have to do to see the Medusa is look her in the face: and she isn't deadly. She is beautiful and she laughs.³⁹

One of the criticisms levelled at Cixous and at French feminist theory more generally is its apparent tendency towards essentialism. For example, if the 'repressed feminine' is seen as the site of an authentic female voice, does this not reinforce, even celebrate, women's inferior position within the social contract? Furthermore, *écriture féminine*'s insistence on 'writing the body' has been criticised for locating difference anatomically, in nature rather than in culture. However, in Cixous' case at least this last argument can be countered, as for her the body is always cultural; whilst acknowledging that it has for women been historically a site of oppression, she nevertheless insists that to evade the bodily is to perpetuate the very structures which have made women's bodies a place of vulnerability and guilt.

³⁷ Chapter Five explores this question of *écriture féminine* further, in relation to Cixous' own play *The Name of Oedipus*.

³⁸ *Jouissance* is not a term which can easily be translated. Drawing off the senses in which it is used by Kristeva, Lacan, Monreay and Irigaray, Maggie Humm defines it as a form of enjoyment which is "sexual, spiritual, physical and conceptual." Humm (1995) *A Dictionary of Feminist Theory*: Hemel Hempstead, Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 135-36.

³⁹ Cixous (1975b) *op.cit.*, 68-9.

In this section I have identified only a few of the existing feminist approaches to re-vision, myth and writing, and in the examples I have used I am aware that at this point I am doing little more than touching on the strategies proposed. However, I will return to these and other critical perspectives in later chapters. To summarise, although there are clearly significant differences between the approaches I have referred to here, there are certain common patterns. Myth is recognised as a key site of investigation because it has constructed, and continues to construct, potent narratives of identity and behaviour. Within these ideological narratives, 'Woman' has been defined in ways which deny and repress the realities of women's experiences. By interrogating myth, then, feminism can reveal that which has been suppressed and at the same time, release energies which can be directed towards female empowerment. Finally, language is recognised as a potent but loaded method of interrogation; feminist re-vision of myth may therefore subvert patriarchal discourse and reappropriate and redefine its terms, or explore the possibilities of an alternative language.

MYTH, THEATRE AND THE FEMINIST PUBLIC SPHERE

Up until this point, I have not addressed the subject of theatre. It is probably still the case that feminist re-visionings of myth are on the whole better-known in poetry and prose than in dramatic form⁴⁰, and discussions of contemporary women's uses of myth most frequently draw on examples from literature and the fine arts.⁴¹

Nevertheless, the theatre has always been an important site for the representation and interrogation of myth and continues to be so. The plays of the ancient Greek dramatists, for example, are still regularly staged, and frequently in ways which seek to rethink

⁴⁰ Examples of re-visioning myth in women's poetry can be found in the works of H.D., Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Jenny Joseph, Elaine Feinstein, Carol Ann Duffy and Liz Lochhead, among others; in prose writing, Angela Carter (whose work I discuss), Margaret Atwood, Tanith Lee and Suniti Namjoshi are some of the many writers who have explored this approach.

⁴¹ Elinor Gadon does include a number of performance artists in her discussion of myth in contemporary women's artistic practices, such as Carolee Schneemann and Rachel Rosenthal; nevertheless, her focus tends to be on 'images' rather than sound, movement, etc, in a full performance sense. Gadon (1990) *op.cit.*. Heide Göttner-Abendroth's *The Dancing Goddess: Principles of a Matriarchal Aesthetic* (1991, Boston, Beacon Press), for instance, draws its contemporary examples primarily from painting, sculpture and poetry; the book does, however, include reference to festival and ritual ceremonies.

them in gender terms.⁴² On the other hand, modern playwrights too have retold myths for their own times, producing plays which in some cases have similarly achieved the status of a classic.⁴³ Myths are also the life-blood of contemporary storytelling performance, which continually reinvents its material in order to communicate the 'traditional' in a manner which resonates with today's audiences.⁴⁴

In this study I focus specifically on the work of women in theatre, and thus I will be drawing on the arguments outlined in the previous section relating to feminist re-visioning of myth. However, these arguments are generally related to women's *writing*. It should be clear that where theatre is concerned, any debate relating to 'women's language', for example, must include not merely words on a page but gesture, movement, sound and image; even this fails to go far enough, however, as the 'language of theatre' must surely include the whole event: the social and political context, the nature and cultural status of the venue, the audiences targeted, and so on. Theatre takes place in the public forum and, importantly, is a collaborative practice. I am concerned not simply with writing strategies but with performance impact. In this context the mythic can never be divorced from the social. I have thus sought to adopt a critical approach which assists in foregrounding the complexities of this interrelationship, and in this project will be principally drawing on the work of Rita Felski.

(i) The feminist public sphere

The 'feminist public sphere' is a theoretical model developed by critic Rita Felski and

⁴² An example of the creative staging of myth-based 'classic drama' can be seen in the Rumanian director Silviu Purcarete's production of *Les Danaïdes* (1996), presented to audiences as a 'lost' tetralogy pieced together from fragments of Aeschylus' writing. This much-publicised event had a cast of over 100, and had a principal aim of counteracting "the misogyny of Aeschylus" (programme note); it is debatable, in my view, how far this aim was realised in practice.

⁴³ I would suggest Sartre's *The Flies* (1942) and Anouilh's *Antigone* (1949) as European examples.

⁴⁴ An excellent example of this, in my view, is the storytelling performance *Itan Kahani* (1992) presented by Mallika Sarabhai and Peter Badejo, a collaboration which brought together Indian and African as well as female and male traditions, in order to examine the politics of storytelling and myth-making.

outlined in her study *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*⁴⁵. In this work Felski examines reasons behind the emergence of a “large and distinctive body of feminist literature” over the last two to three decades. She argues that in its attitude towards cultural production, feminism has been dominated by two potentially opposed positions: one which emphasises the text’s pragmatic political use-value, and the other which argues for the gendered nature of language itself and the creation of an oppositional and authentic ‘feminine’ language. Felski sees the former position, which is concerned primarily with ideology, as influenced by Anglo-American feminism, and the latter, concerned primarily with textual aesthetics, as influenced by French feminism. It should be noted however that whilst these positions may indeed exist as cultural tendencies, they are certainly not templates; Mary Daly’s work, for example, incorporates strategies which have much in common with those frequently associated with ‘French’ feminism.

In her study Felski identifies significant problems with each of the theoretical positions indicated above. The approach viewed as predominantly Anglo-American is criticised by her for its assumption that texts can be understood purely in terms of their utilitarian function, and for its dismissal of questions of artistic form and technique; it is thus “unable to account for the pleasure gained from literature and art in cases where the ideologies of text and feminist reader cannot be said to coincide.”⁴⁶ Felski raises different problems in relation to the ‘French feminist’ position. She argues strongly that no form is ‘radical’ in itself, and that attention must be paid both to content and to conditions of production and reception; this point is particularly relevant given the claims made for *écriture féminine*, discussed earlier in the chapter. She further argues that a position which insists on the construction of language and the text as the only site for ‘authentic’ feminist work necessarily promotes only the activity of an intellectual

⁴⁵ Felski, Rita (1989) *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*: UK, Hutchinson Radius.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

The 'feminist public sphere', then, is the model proposed by Felski which accommodates both of the feminist positions described above and develops beyond either. In the creation of the model, she is primarily indebted to Jürgen Habermas' work on structural changes within the public sphere⁴⁸, and it is helpful at this point to clarify the main features of Habermas' arguments. Habermas identified the emergence of a 'bourgeois public sphere' - a formation determined by specific social and historical circumstances - in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century. Essentially the bourgeois public sphere was a critical and discursive community bound by certain shared assumptions. The foremost of these was a belief in rationality, which implies that arguments are to be legitimised by critical reason rather than by appeals to tradition, religious dogma or privilege.⁴⁹ In theory, then, participation in this critical public domain was open to all; in practice its members were almost exclusively male property-owners and the enlightened aristocracy. The bourgeois public sphere

is thus characterised by a blindness to the actual and unequal material conditions which render its own existence possible and holds fast to the illusion that humanity is adequately represented by the male property-owning public.⁵⁰

Despite this disjunction between its real and ideal functions, Felski, following Habermas, argues that the bourgeois public sphere represented a significant emancipatory moment in its proposition of a relatively autonomous discursive space which defined itself critically against state power.

⁴⁷ Felski examines a number of realist and 'confessional' feminist novels as the primary texts for her study. She is particularly concerned about the dismissal of such work (which has been a very popular genre for women writers) by proponents of the French feminist-influenced standpoint, who tend to view it as 'regressive' because it fails to be sufficiently experimental in aesthetic terms. Felski quotes Cixous, for example: "most women are like this: they do someone else's - man's - writing, and in their innocence sustain it and give it voice, and end up producing writing that's in effect masculine". *Ibid*, 44. Felski identifies a fundamental disparity between the assertion that a particular way of writing is 'feminine' and the realities of the work many women are actually producing.

⁴⁸ Felski's source here is Jürgen Habermas (1974) 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopaedia Article': *New German Critique* Vol.1, No.3, 49-55.

⁴⁹ Felski (1989) *op.cit.*, 164-5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 165.

In his examination of structural changes within the public sphere, Habermas identifies the growth of capitalism, industrialisation and state bureaucracies as forces which have led to a “blurring of the distinction between civil society and the state upon which the bourgeois public sphere depends and a consequent depoliticisation of public discourse”.⁵¹ Since Habermas first argued this in 1962 there have been, as Felski identifies, significant political developments (such as the radicalisation of student groups in the 1960s) which could imply the growth of ‘counter-public spheres’. One of the most significant counter-ideologies to have developed in recent years is the women’s movement; on the basis of this, Felski proposes a critical view of feminism, indebted to Habermas, which she terms the ‘feminist public sphere’.

Like the bourgeois public sphere, the feminist public sphere is essentially a discursive community with a common identity:

here it is the shared experience of gender-based oppression which provides the mediating factor intended to unite all participants beyond their specific differences.⁵²

It can also be termed a *counter*-public sphere, as unlike the bourgeois public sphere there is no claim to a representative universality; instead it is explicitly partial, as in the case of other oppositional identities defined by a specific community of interest (e.g. of race, class or sexual preference). It should be noted, of course, that the very existence of a feminist public sphere is in opposition to the historical confinement of women to the *private* sphere; the ‘discursive space’ now available to women is one that has been fought for. An important concern for feminism has always been a theorisation of the interrelationships between the public and the private, hence the slogan adopted by the women’s movement, “the personal is political”.⁵³

However, it will soon be evident that here, as with the bourgeois public sphere, there is

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 166.

⁵³ For a discussion of this interrelationship and its significance for feminist theatre, see Wandor, Michelene (1980) ‘ “The Personal is Political”: Feminism and the Theatre’: in Craig, Sandy ed. (1980) *Dreams and Deconstructions*: Ambergate, Amber Lane Press.

a tension between a 'real' and an 'ideal' status. In theory, all women have equal access; in practice, difference in educational opportunity, for instance, means this is not really so. Furthermore, in the desire of the feminist public sphere to express collectivity and develop a supportive shared identity for women, individual differences (for instance of class and race) may be suppressed.⁵⁴ It can be argued that this 'suppression' may be to some degree an inevitable side-effect of the need to emphasise commonality and solidarity; however, these differences cannot be permanently suspended and a movement which aims to challenge patriarchal authority has to acknowledge and deal with its own authoritative hierarchies.

The feminist public sphere has two chief functions: (i) *internally*, the development of an oppositional gender-specific identity and a consciousness of community amongst women, and (ii) *externally*, the dissemination of feminist ideas outward through society as a whole. Clearly, there is potential conflict between these two primary functions. In its most extreme form, this is a conflict between separatism, on the one hand, and integration, on the other. Felski sees the position influenced by French feminism outlined earlier as crucially linked to the first of these functions, in its insistence on woman as 'Other', arguably outside the conceptual system. Anglo-American feminism by contrast pays more attention to the ideological contextualising of feminist activity, and hence emphasises the second function, which stresses wider social transformation.

Both functions identified above are vitally important. Each critical position has validity, but, as noted earlier, neither can be used exclusively. Felski stresses the need to pay attention both to the conditions of production and reception of feminist texts, and to the historical changes feminism has itself undergone. She notes that

[a]t certain historical moments the urgency of political struggles may take priority over aesthetic considerations, which will be subordinated to specific didactic and ideological goals; in other instances [...] it becomes (politically) important to resist the instrumentalization of literature and to assert the validity of artistic experimentation and aesthetic pleasures and knowledge as legitimate goals in their own right.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Felski notes that this is particularly true of 'academic feminism', where the majority of women writing and teaching are white and middle-class and their work frequently reflects this unconscious bias. Felski (1989) *op.cit.*, 168.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 178.

(ii) Feminist theatre and the feminist public sphere

Despite the fact that Felski herself applies the model to literature, it will be clear that its emphasis on contexts of production and reception has immediate relevance for analysis of theatre - an activity which, in a sense, always takes place within the public sphere.⁵⁶ In theatre, as in other forms of public discourse, women continue to fight for full participation; in Britain women are still under-represented as playwrights and directors, and have in some historical and cultural contexts been barred even from the audience.

The model proposed by Felski provides a useful framework for examining the multiple theatrical activities women now engage in: writing and directing for the Royal National Theatre in London, producing lesbian pantomimes in New York's WOW Cafe, working in educational and community contexts all over the world. If a more specific example is taken, here from a British context, the application of Felski's model can be illustrated. Several (although certainly not all) pieces of early twentieth-century suffragette theatre, and of agit-prop feminist theatre of the late 1960s and 1970s, could reasonably be regarded as formally somewhat crude; however application of Felski's model would suggest that such examples testify to the fact that these were movements where at times aesthetics were subordinated to ideology, necessitated by the urgency of political struggles.⁵⁷

As noted earlier, feminism has long been concerned to challenge both the association of women and men with the private and public respectively, and the artificial separation of these two spheres. It is not surprising, then, that a very frequent strategy of women's theatre has been to juxtapose scenes of private or domestic life with others of public

⁵⁶ It could be argued that theatre salons - where historically some individual women have achieved a considerable degree of creative freedom - constitute a private rather than a public sphere, as generally performances were presented within fairly closed communities. Nevertheless, such events still move beyond the personal to the communal, and as such can be considered 'public'.

⁵⁷ Having said this, it would be incorrect to imply that feminist theatre at these points was uninterested in artistic experimentation, as the early volumes of Methuen's *Plays by Women*, and the anthology *Modern Drama by Women 1880s-1930s* (ed. Katherine Kelly 1996, London, Routledge) clearly demonstrate.

events, in order to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the one with the other.⁵⁸

Felski's model of the feminist public sphere, then, opens up discussion of these relationships in terms both of aesthetics and ideology.

(iii) Re-visioning myth in feminist theatre

Historically and cross-culturally, women have made use of myth as a source of artistic inspiration, and very frequently this approach has led to a conscious re-visioning of mythic symbols and narratives. In theatre, as elsewhere, the work of re-vision takes a wide variety of forms. I will give three brief examples here (all of which will be expanded upon later in the thesis) in order to indicate this breadth and diversity.

Hélène Cixous

As I have noted, the French author Hélène Cixous has explored myth through theatre as well as in essays, novels and poetry. Cixous has frequently equated the feminine with the mythic and archaic in her writing, a strategy which forms part of her continued exploration of *écriture féminine*, an authentic feminine language. Cixous' writings on myth seem to have echoes of Jung's theory of the collective unconscious (in which essential archetypal patterns are thought to recur, across cultures and time periods), but for her it is an archaic feminine that has been repressed by the processes of patriarchal 'civilisation'. However, in contrast with Jung's own belief, mentioned earlier, that archetypes embodied universal truths because they escaped the specificity of culture, for Cixous such readings are always culturally mediated.⁵⁹

In terms of Felski's argument, Cixous's work appears to foreground the former of the functions of the feminist public sphere, identified previously: the development of an oppositional female identity based on the experience of gender oppression. Her play *The Name of Oedipus: Song of the Forbidden Body* (1978) seems in part to reflect such an aim, since it refuses to accept the authority of the father and instead celebrates

⁵⁸ One fairly straightforward example of this strategy in practice is Red Ladder's *Strike While the Iron is Hot* (1972), which dramatises the gradual reform of Helen and Dave's domestic patterns, alongside their struggle for improved conditions for both men and women at work.

⁵⁹ Hélène Cixous (1981) 'Castration or Decapitation?': in Eagleton, Mary ed. (1997) *Feminist Literary Theory*: Oxford, Blackwell, 324-25.

the power of maternal sexuality. The form of the play is poetic, the speeches full of feminine imagery, exploring and deconstructing the gendered nature of the French language itself. The intended effect is not to convince an audience of Cixous' position by means of rational argument, but in a sense to seduce and win by touching repressed memories and emotions. In these ways, the play reveals many of the preoccupations with aesthetic strategies associated with French feminism.

Franca Rame

Cixous' approach can be contrasted with that of the Italian theatre activist Franca Rame, whose decision to utilise myth is self-conscious and explicitly politically motivated. Rame's *Medea* (1977) makes no appeal to 'the feminine' in any essential sense; such notions are in fact strongly resisted, and the emphasis is placed on the manufacture of gender through social conditioning. While *Medea* does not attempt any form of historical authenticity, Rame deliberately chooses the context of ancient Greece to create a critical distance to facilitate examination of issues which are of contemporary significance: the male/female double standard, and the stereotyping of women as nurturers, who are then considered 'unnatural' if they do not put their children's lives and needs before their own.

Unlike Cixous, whose style is highly poetic and who plays formally on word structures in order to oppose what she sees as patriarchal discourse, Rame adopts the language of critical reason.⁶⁰ Words are weapons that have been used by men to keep women in a subordinate role, lullabies that have rocked them to sleep when they needed to be alert. It could be argued that in Rame's play, words fail, in that nothing *Medea* says really penetrates the walls behind which the female chorus have retreated, and thus finally she resorts to killing. However this is where historical distance comes in; while Rame has

⁶⁰ It is worth noting here that women's supposed *lack* of reason was a familiar argument given for their general exclusion from the bourgeois public sphere. Peter Wagner notes: "In politics, as in the other discourses, the main argument given [for women's exclusion] was on the natural endowments of women, a specific female anthropology that focused on emotions and lack of control, thus also lack of civilisation and amenability to reason." Wagner, Peter (1994) *A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline*: London, Routledge, 40. Therefore when feminism adopts the position that critical, goal-orientated argument is essentially 'patriarchal' it places itself in a problematic light by aligning women, by implication, with the irrational or uncivilised. Rame's strategy in *Medea* thus operates in contrast to that of Cixous.

deliberately chosen to retain this conclusion to the mythic narrative, it will not be the ending for contemporary women. In relation to Felski's model, Rame's work serves both main functions of the feminist public sphere; she emphasises opposition and female solidarity, whilst at the same time never separating this from questions of context, and from related issues of class and culture.

It is not surprising that the majority of practitioners whose work I examine in this study, if not all, are concerned with both ideological and aesthetic issues. Furthermore, I would suggest that women's theatrical re-visioning of myth has been one important way of challenging oppositions of this kind. An important project of feminism has been the exploration and deconstruction of binarisms, such as Male/Female, Rationality/Irrationality, Mind/Body, Objectivity/Subjectivity and Civilisation/Savagery; the responses feminism has offered have, however, been diverse. In the case of radical feminism (and there are clear links here to the so-called French feminist argument referred to previously) the response has been to emphasise and valorise the 'feminine' qualities of behaviour our culture has repressed in the name of progress. By contrast, materialist feminism has tended to view such oppositions as artificial, the result of a historical process of social and cultural conditioning. It is clear that mythology provides fertile material for this debate, as it can seem on the one hand to provide evidence of 'essential' behaviours that transcend time, but on the other can be challenged by asking questions of the cultures through which it is being channelled: who tells these stories and why?

Caryl Churchill and David Lan

In relation to this question of binarism, Caryl Churchill and David Lan's co-authored play⁶¹ *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986) is useful to consider. Churchill states in her introduction to the work that a central reason for writing it was to explore the stereotyping of women as peaceful in contrast to men's violence, arguing that if women

⁶¹ I am aware that my decision to include a play which is in part male-authored within a discussion of feminist theatre is contentious, from a purist perspective. However, I consider *A Mouthful of Birds* to be quite clearly a feminist piece and, as I discuss in Chapter Three, the fact that it was both co-authored and cross-disciplinary is important given the intention (of the project itself, and within feminist thought) to challenge boundary lines.

want to support peaceful behaviour in men, it may also be necessary for them - women - to acknowledge and learn to deal with their own capacity for violence. To this end the story of the Bacchae is used, a myth that incorporates the elements both of violent, uncontrolled women and of 'feminised' men. In this way the authors' approach seems to be not unlike Franca Rame's, described earlier. However, the play *stages* the myth as a potentially explosive force which breaks into and disrupts the lives of certain individuals, those who are in some way marginalised or otherwise in positions of extremity. These scenes of disruption use few words; Dionysus enters as primarily a physical presence exerting a direct bodily effect on the modern characters (indeed, they become literally possessed). This aspect of the work seems to link Churchill and Lan more closely with Cixous, emphasising myth as an undercurrent, with the power to disturb the 'order' of civilised life. Using Felski's model, it appears that *A Mouthful of Birds* is deeply concerned with notions of authentic identity and 'otherness', and with the understanding of women's behaviour in relation not simply to men's, but in the wider context of class and race issues.

When the diversity of women's theatrical re-vision of myth is considered, even briefly, it becomes clear that the range of work is, in the first place, far more complex than a simple identification of feminist 'heroines' and secondly, is not an escapist retreat into fantasy from 'the real world'; as Felski observes in relation to feminist literature, "[a] celebration of subjectivity, spirituality and myth does not necessarily imply a lack of commitment to social and political change".⁶² The application of the model of a feminist public sphere assists the identification and evaluation of key tendencies in this work and helps to place it within changing social and, specifically, theatrical contexts. A central theme of the study will be the challenging of authority, just as feminism challenges the authority of patriarchy, one telling of a myth challenges another, women's re-visioning challenges society's cultural inheritance and the theatre work itself explores possibilities of opposition both through aesthetic strategies and dramatic narratives. I also question what authorises feminism to voice its oppositions and identify where feminism as a collective movement fragments and authorises some oppositional voices over others.

⁶² Felski (1989) *op.cit.*, 128.

DESIGN OF THE THESIS

The organisation of the chapters which follow is intended to present the reader with a variety of case studies in theatrical re-visioning, grouped together in ways which reveal certain common patterns. Specifically, the structure is designed to draw attention to perceived interrelationships between a mythical realm and a recognisable contemporary reality, and to reveal a shift of emphasis in the plays as a body from the external/social to the internal/psychological. It is my contention that the practice of feminist re-vision always interweaves these threads, despite marked differences in surface strategies. Sarah Daniels' *Neaptide*, for example, explores the myth of Demeter and Persephone without ever leaving the staged scene of 1980s Britain; by contrast Serena Sartori and Renata Coluccini tackle the same myth in *Demeter Beneath the Sand*, but present a *mise-en scène* which resists reading as even an abstract representation of the contemporary world. Both pieces investigate the resonances of myth in the lives of modern women. This is not to say that the two arrive at the same conclusions, or that the paths taken in each case are arbitrary. What I suggest, and the thesis demonstrates, is that dimensions of the historical/mythical and social/psychological are always braided together in the re-visionary project, even when one thread appears to dominate.

To complicate matters a little further, it seemed to me potentially misleading to group pieces simply in terms of their surface appearances, for example moving from work which represents a contemporary world explicitly (and with the mythic dimension implicit) to work which does the reverse. Franca Rame's *Medea* may not attempt to create a sense of place which is in any way otherworldly, but neither does it make explicit references to contemporary reality; nevertheless, the context within which the monologue is designed to be performed, coupled with Rame's own reputation as a political activist, leave the audience in no doubt that her targets are topical and urgent. With this in mind, I have grouped case studies with an eye to their authors' apparent preoccupations, as well as by the evidence of their formal choices. At times I have preferred to let myself be guided by my feelings about the work, rather than adhere

rigidly to an authoritative scheme of categorisation. Given the nature of the work itself, in its complex interweaving of worlds, my choices represent simply one possible approach.

Chapter Two, then, groups together four plays which seem to me to be essentially concerned with the social issues of their day. For Hella Haasse, Sarah Daniels and Franca Rame myths offer a way in to the investigation of contemporary problems; Haasse and Rame also focus explicitly on myth as ideological construction, while Daniels implicitly challenges the myth she references by retelling it within the context of lesbian experience. Chapter Three brings together re-visionings by Maureen Duffy, Caryl Churchill and David Lan, and Timberlake Wertenbaker, which explore tensions between the mythical and the everyday and articulate these through a variety of formal disruptions. Chapter Four examines one piece by Andrée Chedid and two by Angela Carter. All three of these appear to embrace the territory of myth, whilst simultaneously representing this as shadowy, sometimes alien and often fearful to contemporary consciousness; in these works myth is wrestled with, mentally and physically, but valuable life experience is gained. Chapter Five discusses work by Serena Sartori and Renata Coluccini of the Teatro Cooperativo del Sole, and by Hélène Cixous. Both examples explore mythical realms and archetypal imagery without obvious contemporary social reference, concerned to excavate and chart an inner landscape perceived to lie beneath the surface of daily behaviour.

It is also necessary to indicate here that I will not approach each of the plays in the same way. This is not simply because the pieces are themselves diverse, but because I have experienced them in diverse ways. I have seen stagings of some, but not all. In particular cases - such as *Neaptide*, *A Mouthful of Birds* and *The Love of the Nightingale* - I have had access to a considerable amount of very helpful material relating to the original production. In others - such as *A Thread in the Dark*, *The Goddess Lar* and *Demeter Beneath the Sand* - I have uncovered little or nothing. This scarcity of information is a result both of working only with what is available in English translation, and of the fact that in certain cases the plays I study have received marginal exposure even in their own countries. Where I lack direct information, I have

attempted to read the performance imaginatively from the text, bringing to bear upon it my understanding both of the social and theatrical context, and the individual playwright's preoccupations. I have also directed productions of *A Mouthful of Birds* and *Vampirella* and have found this form of practical research into the subject extremely valuable; I will therefore be drawing on these experiences in my discussions.

This study makes no claim to be exhaustive, for obviously I include only a sample of the work of re-visioning which has been practised by women in theatre within the last half-century. (Nor does the focus of my study imply that there are no plays by women which re-vision myth before this period.⁶³) I have chosen texts which seem to me both to reveal a wide range of strategies in approaches to the re-visioning of myth, and to raise a number of problems and challenges which can be illuminated through feminist analysis (and indeed, may themselves help to shed light on feminist dilemmas). In the processes of research I have encountered many further examples and if I have not included these, this arises from the need for selectivity rather than from a belief that the work lacked merit.

Finally, in terms both of myths re-visioned, and of the national identities of playwrights and practitioners, this study is European in emphasis. Clearly this is in part a reflection of my own identity and context as a researcher, but it is also a result of the dominance of, particularly, Graeco-Roman mythology within Western theatrical traditions. This seems to mean that whilst feminist research within Europe has devoted considerable attention to non-Western myth traditions, within theatre the emphasis still tends to be on re-visioning of classical myth (and this tendency is perhaps unsurprising, if it aims explicitly to challenge and criticise myth as it is staged within the theatrical canon). However, there is plenty of scope for further research to engage with re-visioning of myths from other cultural traditions, and to do so would, I believe, be both valuable and rewarding.

⁶³ I have written elsewhere on Zinaida Gippius' theatrical re-visioning of the *rusalka* (Russian form of the mermaid or siren), which was published in 1901. See Babbage (2000) ' "Fatal Attraction": the *rusalka* reborn in Zinaida Gippius' *Sacred Blood*': in *New Comparison*, forthcoming.

CHAPTER II Social dramas

In this chapter I consider four plays, written across four decades. These pieces investigate the role of myth as ideological narrative, used to enforce particular models of individual and collective responsibility; in re-visioning these coercive structures, the playwrights offer provocative reinterpretations, or produce their own counter-myths. A *Thread in the Dark*, by the Dutch playwright Hella Haasse, dates from the late 1950s and reworks the classical myth of Ariadne, Theseus and the Minotaur in order to address issues of political power and personal responsibility pertinent to the social context of post-war Holland.¹ Secondly, I look at the work of Italian actress and playwright Franca Rame, actually a contemporary of Haasse, although the pieces I focus on - *The Same Old Story* and *Medea* - were written and performed in the mid 1970s.² These two monologues seek to deconstruct those pervasive myths of marriage and motherhood which seemingly raise women's status and responsibility, whilst in practice limiting their rights as individuals. Finally, I turn to the British playwright Sarah Daniels with an examination of *Neptune*, first produced in 1986, a play which uses the myth of Demeter and Persephone to explore - and ultimately to celebrate - the power of relationships between women.³ The themes of Daniels' play, with its central character, a lesbian mother struggling to retain custody of her young daughter, were highly topical in the mid-1980s (and indeed continue to be so). The year following the production saw the inclusion of Clause 27 within the Local Government Bill, which became law in 1988 as Section 28 - a piece of legislation which prohibited Local Government from 'promoting' homosexuality, either through education or by offering a project financial assistance.⁴ Through *Neptune* Daniels consciously presents a 'positive image' of a lesbian mother, thus challenging perceived wisdom about who

¹ Haasse, Hella S. (c.1958) trans. Couling, Della (1997) *A Thread in the Dark*: in Robson, Cheryl ed. (1997) *A Touch of the Dutch*: London, Aurora Metro Press & Nederland Theater Instituut. All page references are from this edition and are indicated in the text by the abbreviation TD.

² Rame, Franca (1977) *The Same Old Story* and *Medea*: included in Rame, Franca and Fo, Dario (1991) *A Woman Alone and other plays*: London, Methuen. All page references are from this edition and are indicated in the text by the abbreviations SOS and M respectively.

³ Daniels, Sarah (1986) *Neptune*: in Daniels, Sarah (1991) *Plays: One*: London, Methuen. All page references are from this edition and are indicated in the text by the abbreviation N.

⁴ As I write, in 1999, Section 28 has yet to be repealed.

might constitute a responsible parent. Considering these plays against Felski's model, it becomes apparent that as a body they present us with examples of women criticising and combating the workings of powerful institutions, and the myths which support them - even at the risk of social ostracism - in their determination to effect permanent change.

Examined as a group, these plays by Haasse, Rame and Daniels can be seen to provide a fairly straightforward illustration of the strategy whereby myths are utilised literally as a 'pretext' for sociopolitical, and ethical, debate. Myths provide analogies for contemporary problems and are interwoven with them, each illuminating the other. This use of myth as a form of social commentary, whilst simultaneously offering an investigation of the very processes of myth-making, is nowhere more evident than in the work of Franca Rame. However, the two monologues I consider here adopt contrasting strategies in their treatment of myth. While *Medea* presents a re-visioning of a very famous anti-heroine, *The Same Old Story* takes no specific tale but instead creates an anarchic concoction blended from bits of every fairytale a "sweet little girl" (SOS: 55) would know (and some she wouldn't). *Medea* offers a reinterpretation of the familiar events of the myth, an alternative perspective; *The Same Old Story*, for all that it is not based on one particular narrative, seems almost an exercise in rewriting. The monologues also differ formally. With *Medea* the audience is drawn into the realm of the myth, and although Rame as performer may shift in her representation of character, that realm itself remains whole, undisturbed. *The Same Old Story*, on the other hand, falls clearly into two parts. The first gives a comic representation of contemporary reality, again with Rame shifting roles to demonstrate her central character's interactions with her lover and with the medical profession as she realises she has become pregnant; in the second, which begins with the new mother relating a fairytale to her daughter, Rame quickly establishes this story world as the new 'reality', and the audience does not then return to the contemporary context with which the monologue began.

Sarah Daniels' *Neaptide* has some similarities with *The Same Old Story* as here too myth is introduced through the device of a mother telling stories to her child. However,

in *Neaptide* the myth of Demeter and Persephone is not dominant, and is not explicitly enacted; the relationship of the myth to the contemporary narrative is implied rather than directly stated. The incorporation of myth within the play fulfils a number of functions. First, as a female-centred 'bedtime story' it emphasises the loving relationship which exists between Claire, a single parent, and her young daughter. Second, as the tale includes the abduction of Persephone, it prepares the audience to expect disruption of the status quo by a male outsider (in this case Poppy's father). However, the conclusion of the story, with its resolution that Persephone will live half the year above ground with her mother and half below with Hades, is not mirrored in the action of the play; in this sense *Neaptide* is a rewriting, as Daniels proposes an alternative ending which denies the masculine principle any right of 'ownership'. Myth is thus introduced both to reinforce themes existing within the contemporary narrative and in order to show that it can itself be rewritten. For Daniels - a lesbian playwright, here emphasising the theme of love between women - the 'harmonious' male/female resolution of the myth cannot be the only possible conclusion.

A Thread in the Dark, the earliest of the plays, has many points of similarity with *Medea*. Like Rame's play, Haasse's takes a classical myth and stages it without at any point 'breaking the frame' to make explicit reference to a contemporary context. The social relevance is, nevertheless, clearly implied. Ariadne's determination to expose the myths - here defined as lies - which perpetuate an oppressive regime, even at the cost of personal exile, had deep resonance for a country still dealing with the legacies of World War II. Like *Medea*, *A Thread in the Dark* seeks to expose the processes of myth-making. However, whilst Rame does this in order to strike a blow for women's rights, Haasse is making a statement about the importance of 'truth' and the need to take a moral stand for its own sake. Ariadne demands honesty from those who wield power, but she does not challenge the hierarchy of the system itself. In a sense, then, *A Thread in the Dark* deals with ethical rather than sociopolitical issues; however, an awareness of the context of writing makes it difficult, if not impossible, to view the problems posed by Haasse as merely hypothetical.

All four plays are united in their project of revealing myths as socially constructed,

rather than upholding them as expressions of timeless truths. The plays ask: who creates these myths, who perpetuates them, and for whose benefit? Haasse and Rame expose myths as ideological narratives created by those who profit most from an unequal system and perpetuated by everyone - or almost everyone - within it, persuaded through hegemonic processes that that system is in their best interests. In Haasse's case it is the people (ungendered) who appear to need these myths to sustain them; Rame's work draws attention to the role played by women in maintaining their own oppression by subscribing to feminine 'ideals' of patience and self-sacrifice. Haasse's and Rame's plays are further connected in their self-referentiality. Commentary from the characters (and in the case of *A Thread in the Dark*, the 'double ending') makes explicit their awareness of themselves as mythic, thus problematising the plays' source texts and drawing attention to the processes of re-visioning. Daniels' *Neoptide* works rather differently. Although this, too, clearly re-visions the myth to which it refers, it is perhaps more concerned with celebration than deconstruction. The love of mother for daughter, central to the Demeter-Persephone story, is examined within a context which imbues it with certain specific frictions; ultimately, however, the play asserts the strength of this bond as one with the power to transcend all forms of cultural difference. This creates a certain degree of tension between the archetypal and the temporal, and has left Daniels' theatre open to criticism about the extent of its commitment to social and political change.

In evaluating each of these re-visionings by Haasse, Rame and Daniels in terms of its efficacy as social critique, attention can usefully be paid to the wider context of production and reception. In the case of *A Thread in the Dark*, first of all, it should however be acknowledged that I have uncovered relatively little specific contextual information. Haasse is a well-established author in her native country, and this, her best-known play, has been staged frequently and in a variety of cultural contexts. It would be reasonable to assume, therefore, that her work has reached a relatively wide theatregoing audience. As a play of ideas and ethical debate, *A Thread in the Dark* can be compared with the earlier rewritings of classical myth by Anouilh and Sartre, for example, with which Haasse would almost certainly have been familiar. In this sense she is operating as part of an established, highly educated tradition within European

playwriting (although by contrast her subject is a myth known to us as narrative rather than through the body of ancient drama - an implied challenge, perhaps, to the classical canon). Haasse is thus working within a broadly mainstream theatrical context; it is perhaps a reflection of this 'establishment' position that *A Thread in the Dark* itself argues for the responsible use of power, rather than calling for radical reform. However, although admittedly Haasse does not identify with the term 'feminist' as such, she is nevertheless one of the very few women dramatists of the period to achieve recognition and success; like her *Ariadne*, she represents an isolated female voice speaking out critically within a patriarchal domain.

Although writing approximately thirty years later, Sarah Daniels' position nevertheless bears some similarity to Haasse's. Daniels has established herself as one of relatively few women playwrights operating within the British theatrical mainstream, with *Neptune* first presented at the National Theatre. Daniels' play, like Haasse's, focusses on the struggle of a marginalised female character to challenge institutions fundamentally supported by the dominant ideology. In contrast with *A Thread in the Dark*, however, *Neptune* articulates an explicit feminist position. Claire finds herself isolated and vulnerable not for what she believes, but simply for who she is. *Neptune* is an 'issue-based' play with a specific social agenda, and examined within its original context of production and reception, its subject is certainly controversial; however, as ultimately the author 'solves' the problem she has posed through a utopian ending, rather than arguing a clear case for social reform, perhaps the challenge the play offers is less significant than might at first appear.

Of the three playwrights examined in this section, it is Franca Rame whose intention to convey a radical message most obviously extends beyond affecting the content of her work, to take on the challenge of production context. Rame and her partner Dario Fo are well-known, in Italy and beyond, as political campaigners as well as practitioners. As their agenda is broadly socialist, they seek to reach a working-class rather than a conventional bourgeois audience, with plays on topical issues designed for immediate

impact.⁵ In taking their theatre into pubs, clubs and factories, and employing techniques drawn from a popular performance tradition, Rame and Fo have very directly challenged the Italian political and cultural establishment and have experienced a range of repressive responses (from withdrawal of funding, to imprisonment). Initially, their theatre paid little attention to issues of gender; however, *The Same Old Story* and *Medea* were created in a period when Italian feminist groups had become particularly active, and when Rame and Fo had both come to a recognition that the oppression of women in society was not simply a by-product of capitalism, but also a problem within the political Left. Rame's monologues focus on the position of women but are directed towards a gender-mixed audience, and are linked together by a commentary from the actress in which she addresses male and female spectators, sometimes separately, sometimes as a body. Like Haasse and Daniels, she shows women coming up against institutional barriers, but demonstrates how lack of social and economic privilege as well as patriarchal prejudice operate to reinforce an unacceptable double standard.

If all these playwrights and their plays are looked at in the frame of the feminist counter-public sphere, their relative positions can be helpfully contrasted. Writing in the late nineteen-fifties, Haasse clearly predates the development of second-wave feminism; *A Thread in the Dark* stands on its own terms within a male-dominated theatrical establishment, voicing a 'feminine' opposition to a powerful patriarchal conspiracy. By contrast, Rame's one-woman plays from the 1970s were written in direct response to the criticisms of Italian feminist collectives that she and Fo had neglected oppressions of gender in their exclusive focus upon class power. In this sense Rame is accepting the validity of feminist claims but without following the separatist route advocated by some radical groups; she thus identifies with the function of the feminist counter-public sphere which stresses the importance of raising wider public consciousness about the position of women and bringing an informed feminist perspective to bear upon all social activities. In addition, Rame's consistent efforts to reach audiences from a lower

⁵ In 1974, Fo described the work he was currently creating with Rame as "throw-away theatre, a theatre which won't go down in bourgeois history, but which is useful, like a newspaper article, a debate or a political action". Mitchell, Tony ed.(1989) *File on Dario Fo*: London, Methuen, 97. In fact, their best-known work *has* since been appropriated by bourgeois theatre; nevertheless they are still less 'acceptable' in Italy than abroad. It is also noteworthy that in recent studies of feminist theatre, Rame is rarely accorded more than a brief reference.

economic class reveal her as to some extent avoiding one pitfall of the feminist community, identified by Felski, of failing to pay attention to the operation of privilege within its own circles. Lastly, Sarah Daniels' *Neaptide* occupies a somewhat problematic position. In mid 1980s Britain, the term 'postfeminism' had just entered into (contentious) use, carrying with it the implication that the feminist agenda had been achieved and that the old label was now restricting rather than liberating.⁶ Indeed, that *Neaptide*, a lesbian play, should be presented at the National Theatre might seem to lend credence to this perception. However, staging the play in this context was in fact a fairly courageous act, given that Daniels' earlier work had been attacked by some powerful critics in terms which clearly gave the lie to the suggestion that sexual equality had been achieved and gender prejudice overcome.⁷ In supporting *Neaptide*, the National Theatre was taking something of a risk; perhaps it was as well for the box office that whilst Daniels takes a highly provocative theme, her treatment of it to some extent shies away from examining its full social implications. In providing an escapist ending, Daniels ultimately releases her audience from the responsibility of confronting the realities of oppression still faced by lesbians. However, to make this criticism is not to negate the production altogether, since creating radical theatre within an establishment context must always be problematic. Given that the feminist counter-public sphere aims not simply to provide a mutually supportive, discursive arena, but also to engage with the task of widespread social transformation, activities within a (potentially hostile) mainstream context are a necessary part of its agenda and we should expect to encounter projects which - in my view, like *Neaptide* - are in some respects limited in their achievement.

⁶ I am aware that the term 'postfeminism' has also been used in other contexts, and potentially carries a variety of implications. See Humm (1989) *op.cit.*, 215.

⁷ In the introduction to *Plays by Women: Vol.6*, Mary Remnant discusses the critical reception of some of Daniels' earlier plays: *Masterpieces*, *Ripen Our Darkness* and *The Devil's Gateway*. Remnant suggests that little attempt was made by male critics, especially, to judge Daniels' ideas on their own merits; reviewers rather gave vent to gut reactions, describing her work as "man-hating", "fanatical", "vitriolic", "bilious", "strident" and "shrill". Remnant comments that "[w]hile, with a few exceptions, female reviewers reacted to Daniels' work with warmth and shocked recognition, much of criticism had taken up arms against her: conceding that she could, at times, muster a certain surreal humour, many dozens of column inches were dedicated to her annihilation as a playwright." Remnant, Mary ed. (1987) *Plays by Women: Vol.6*: London, Methuen, 8.

Leaving the labyrinth:

Hella Haasse's *A Thread in the Dark*

The first play I examine in some detail is also the first chronologically. Written by the Dutch playwright Hella Haasse in the late 1950s⁸, *A Thread in the Dark* was awarded the Visser Neerlandia Prize in 1962 and has since been performed many times in Holland and Flanders. It was also translated and performed in Indonesia in 1975, with the story transposed to ancient Bali. (TD: 94) Haasse was born in 1918, trained as an actress, and in the post-war period wrote several historical novels and biographies, as well as plays; as an author she is perhaps better-known for her literary rather than dramatic output. *A Thread in the Dark* is the most frequently performed of Haasse's theatre pieces. In its reworking of classical mythology, Mieke Kolk sees the play as following the predominantly French tradition of the 1930s and forties established by Giradoux, Sartre, Anouilh and Yourcenar of rewriting classical tragedy from a modern existential viewpoint.⁹ Other sources also indicate that the French pre-war theatrical philosophers were a major influence on the 1950s Dutch theatre, whose contemporary plays tended to focus heavily on debates about the moral and philosophical problems of war, and on issues of individual and collective responsibility.¹⁰ This aptly describes *A Thread in the Dark*, which focuses in particular on the role myth can play in support of political power.

A Thread in the Dark is based on the classical myth of Ariadne, Theseus and the Minotaur. According to Ovid, the Minotaur was a monster - half-bull, half-man - and the offspring of King Minos of Crete's wife Pasiphaë and a white bull sent from the sea by Poseidon. When grown the hybrid creature, which ate human flesh, was shut away by Minos in a highly complex labyrinth. From then on at regular intervals Athens provided seven youths and seven maidens to be sent into the labyrinth as a sacrifice to the Minotaur; this 'tribute' was made in order to protect Athens from invasion by

⁸ No exact dates for the play's first publication or production are given.

⁹ Kolk, Mieke (1997) trans. Morell, Purni (1997) 'Introduction': in Robson ed. (1997) *op.cit.*, 1.

¹⁰ van Deursen, Jackelien & Eggermont, Pol et. al. (1994) 'Netherlands': in Rubin, Don ed. (1994) *The World Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Theatre*: Vol.1: 'Europe': London, Routledge: 596.

Minos' armies. Eventually the Athenian prince Theseus determined to stop the sacrifices by going into the labyrinth himself to fight the monster; he was aided by Minos' daughter Ariadne, who gave him a ball of thread which he was able to use to find his way back out from the maze when he had killed the Minotaur. Theseus, Ariadne (now his promised bride) and the rest of the Athenians departed from Crete by ship; however, after disembarking on the island of Naxos, Theseus left Ariadne asleep on the shore and set sail. Ovid describes this abandonment as "cruel", and offers no explanations for it. Graves suggests that Ariadne could have been deserted for a new mistress, or that Theseus decided Ariadne's arrival in Athens would have been too scandalous, or that Dionysos appeared to Theseus in a dream and claimed Ariadne for himself.¹¹

In Haasse's version of the myth, Ariadne is shocked to discover from her father the truth that in fact there is no Minotaur; the monster/god is a fiction created by Minos as a means of generating fear and obedience and of maintaining belief - at home and abroad - in Crete's invincibility. Ariadne assists Theseus' escape both out of love and in the belief that he will prove the means of exposing the deception to all. However, when Theseus emerges safely from the labyrinth he proclaims not the monster's non-existence, but that he has slaughtered it and hence freed his people. Ariadne comes to understand that this hero needs the lie as much as her father did. Ingeniously, Haasse thus explicitly provides her audience with an explanation for Theseus' decision to leave Ariadne on Naxos: she has threatened to reveal the truth to his people, that there was no Minotaur, and that their leader's heroic tale of battle is empty boasting.

A closer examination of the play's cultural and historical context provides information which gives a useful perspective on the author's choice of theme. During World War Two, German troops in the Netherlands - as elsewhere - identified creative artists as potentially a valuable source for the dissemination of Nazi ideology. The Kultuurkamer (Chamber of Culture) was thus established in Holland and promised generous subsidies to all who joined, but becoming a member was conditional upon signing statements of Nazi affiliation. Whilst some did sign, others formed an underground

¹¹ Ovid (1971), trans. Innes, Mary, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*: Harmondsworth, Penguin, 183-84; Graves, Robert (1978) *The Greek Myths: I*: Harmondsworth, Penguin, 339-40.

network with intellectuals and politicians and created a manifesto addressing the social function of art, which included the following statement:

it is the responsibility of the state to foster the development and prosperity of the arts, to support artists and artistic institutions financially. It is the task of artistic institutions to ensure that everything made by artists can be seen and heard throughout the country (horizontal distribution) and by all levels of the population (vertical distribution).¹²

This commitment to horizontal and vertical distribution was taken as a central element of Dutch artistic policy for several decades following the war. Theatre when Haasse was writing thus aimed to be broadly accessible rather than élitist and tightly controlled; to an extent her play's theme reflects this in its insistence on absolute openness. More obviously, though, *A Thread in the Dark* asks the questions that can be understood as those of a country trying to come to terms with its own history: what choices are available to the individual in times of war, and what principles might a community be prepared to give up in the name of order?

Unlike Anouilh's frequently performed play *Antigone*¹³, *A Thread in the Dark* contains no anachronistic references to make explicit its relevance for a contemporary context; nevertheless, there can be no doubt that Haasse is making use of myth in order to examine modern life. One way that this is communicated is through the extreme simplicity of presentation, which in effect ensures that nothing is there which might blur her audience's vision or allow them to dismiss its action as remote. Haasse has chosen a myth we do not know through ancient drama, and indeed the play has none of the trappings of the Greek tragic theatre; here there is no choric voice, for example, and the text is almost entirely in simple prose: the language of the everyday. The world of the play is signalled as ordinary, familiar. No indications are given in the text in relation to staging or costume, either through stage directions or dialogue; this very lack of detail, plus the brevity of the scenes, would seem to imply a simplicity of presentational

¹² Rubin ed. (1994) *op.cit.*, 596.

¹³ Anouilh, Jean (1981) *Antigone*: London, Eyre Methuen.

style.¹⁴ This means then that Haasse is employing a number of strategies to represent the interactions between Ariadne and the other characters as ordinary, social and entirely credible, while it is the Minotaur which is the ‘myth’: terrifying, incomprehensible, Other - but ultimately, a convenient fiction.

Although *A Thread in the Dark* presents an audience with strong-willed female characters, and represents a lone woman taking a stand against the injustices and deceptions of a male-dominated society, it could be considered problematic to describe it as a feminist play. Quite apart from the fact that it was written prior to the contemporary women’s movement and thus predates the development of the feminist counter-public sphere to which Felski refers, Haasse herself dislikes her work being categorised in this way; her position is, simply, that ‘feminine thought’ must be expressed in literature since it is essential for an understanding of half the population. (TD: 2) However, *A Thread in the Dark* clearly does belong within the broad definition of feminism offered by Felski, which encompasses “all those texts that reveal a critical awareness of women’s subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category”, and, as my discussion will show, provides rewarding material for feminist analysis.¹⁵

In *A Thread in the Dark*, issues of gender are inextricably tied up with those of status, or class. Ariadne’s challenge to her father, through her threat to expose the means by which his authority is maintained, represents a transgression on both levels. Her sister Phaedra reminds her that the “daughters of the king should honour the god” (TD: 114); because she is both female and royal, Ariadne is told she has a duty to uphold the *status quo*. In challenging her father on matters of state, she is clearly stepping outside what is her socially-regulated sphere. By establishing a stark contrast between the choices made by the two sisters, Haasse examines in explicitly gendered terms both the reward and cost of taking an individual stand against repressive authority. Ariadne is prepared to risk the opposition of her father, her husband-to-be and her own people because she insists on the principle of truth. Minos appeals to her: “My interests, Crete’s interests,

¹⁴ The assumption that the play would have been simply staged is borne out by theatre historians who have noted that while the post-war Dutch theatre was initially characterised by pictorial excess, the late 1950s and 1960s saw a development of much greater clarity and simplicity in terms of design. Rubin ed. (1994) *op.cit.*, 611.

¹⁵ Felski (1989) *op.cit.*, 14.

are yours" (TD: 108), and when this fails to move her he decides that she must be the next sacrifice:

MINOS: What do my power and success mean to her? Nothing. What follows? That she doesn't feel as a daughter should. And if she doesn't, then she's not my daughter. And if she's not my daughter then I can regard her as a danger. What prevents me from removing a danger? (TD: 110)

By Minos' definition, Ariadne's behaviour constitutes more than a betrayal; for him, she relinquishes her very identity as 'king's daughter'.

In a sense, the recognition that her opposition must sever her association with her royal house appears to give Ariadne greater freedom to act. Her sex and status have given her protection, but have also kept her deliberately 'in the dark'. Even before she learns the truth about the Minotaur from her father, Ariadne wakes up to the reality of her community's practice of ritual slaughter. Phaedra cannot understand her sister's altered behaviour:

PHAEDRA: You've been at the festival year after year, from beginning to end... You sang and danced with the rest of us, even after the victims had gone into the labyrinth. How could you do it then, Ariadne?
ARIADNE: Don't think I didn't care. I was full of fear and loathing, but I didn't know any better. I believed it had to be like that. I thought: the Minotaur is a severe god, his worship is the great tradition of our kingdom, our people. That is unalterable. (TD: 99)

Minos argues that the lie which he planted in the mind of his own people and in other nations took root, and grew to become a mythic 'truth' of gigantic proportions, which now perpetuates itself. The Minotaur has no physical existence, but conceptually it is at the heart of Crete's prosperity. Ariadne is forced to recognise that her disclosure would not threaten merely the king's rule, but could shatter the fabric of her society. The Minotaur is no longer only Minos' invention, as he reminds her:

MINOS: [The people] have made themselves afraid. They have given my idea, the Minotaur, shape and inflated it with their own imagination. He stamps and snorts and roars and spreads death and destruction, driven by what lives in every Cretan of secret hatred and resentment and black thoughts and suppressed appetites. (TD: 109)

As Ariadne learns, the sacrificial victims are killed not by a Minotaur but by the

labyrinth itself in which those who enter become hopelessly lost. Haasse makes explicit, however, that the labyrinth exists on a metaphorical as well as a physical level:

ARIADNE: Oh, a labyrinth of cunning and lies.
MINOS: The labyrinth is the national symbol. (TD: 109)

For Ariadne - and perhaps, by implication, for Haasse - the true monster is the mental labyrinth where one is always in the dark, unable to distinguish a true path from a false one. Within this maze from which it may seem pointless even to try to escape, the easiest course seems to be an acceptance of partial obscurity, in order to save oneself from being pushed even further in, becoming irredeemably lost.

By and large, this course of acceptance is the one taken by Phaedra. Rejecting any model of female solidarity, Haasse establishes a sharp contrast between the two sisters; Phaedra conforms to the social and gender role expected of her, and ultimately wins the prizes available to someone in her position - popular approval, a husband, a throne - though the play reveals that these are not freely given but rather bought at the cost of a sacrifice of ethical principles.¹⁶ However, Phaedra does not reap these rewards simply by default; rather she actively schemes to achieve her ambitions, making the most of every opportunity to demonstrate that she, rather than her sister, would be in every respect a more desirable choice for Theseus. Whereas Ariadne is absolute in her refusal to compromise the truth to support the vanity of her proposed husband, Phaedra is happy to indulge him:

PHAEDRA: The Minotaur is your affair, Theseus. I am only a girl, I don't understand these things. You're a hero, and it's your job to fight monsters. You slew the Minotaur. (TD: 129)

As Phaedra says, she has been educated to sit on a throne, but this means that she has learned not how to rule but rather how to obey her husband: "Your word would be law for me"; for Theseus, Phaedra's apparent lack of personal will would thus make her "an exemplary consort." (TD: 128)

¹⁶ A comparison could be drawn here between Ariadne and Phaedra, and Sophocles' Antigone and Ismene. Sophocles represents Ismene as conventionally submissive, in contrast to her defiant sister; he also shows Ismene's vain attempt to share in Antigone's eventual punishment, which distinguishes her from the manipulative Phaedra.

It is not only Theseus who perceives Phaedra as politically a more satisfactory choice than her sister. Whilst assuring the prince that it is entirely his decision, the skipper of the boat promotes Phaedra very pointedly as the 'people's choice':

SKIPPER: Now take that other princess, the little one. She was just watching the games on the beach. She laughed and clapped her hands and gave a silver clasp from her hair to the winner. You see, the fellows like that sort of thing. (TD: 135)

This is what is wanted from a queen: to be beautiful, gracious, an awarder of prizes. What's wanted from a king is strong government, and heroism; the skipper expresses the people's dissatisfaction at their leader's inexplicable reluctance to talk publicly about the slaying of the Minotaur, a reticence which they sense is linked with Ariadne who, it is said, "has the evil eye." (TD: 134) The complexity of power relations thus becomes apparent; does Theseus control his people, or do they manipulate him? The assertion that Ariadne is the source of bad luck should lead the audience to anticipate her eventual scapegoating and that her place will be taken by her more compliant sister.

In reality, however, Phaedra is not passive and gentle but ambitious and calculating. As far as she is concerned, Ariadne will lose Theseus because she does not know how to deal with him. She, on the other hand, is prepared to make him feel like the hero he believes that he must be, ultimately because "[a] man who is content with himself can be led" (TD: 130); Phaedra will work within the system, will play whatever role is required of her, in order to seize a measure of power for herself. Ariadne rejects Phaedra's version of marriage as a battle of wills, with advantages gained through strategies of judicious deception: "I don't want to lead Theseus! I want him to be in control of himself." (TD: 130) For Ariadne, thinking for oneself and standing up for those beliefs is a moral necessity; she tells Theseus that for her "[t]o renounce that is [...] non-being, death." (TD: 139) To adopt the image of 'woman' that society requires is by definition, then, not to be.¹⁷

¹⁷ For Ariadne, it is suggested, to speak out is to be; to keep silent is non-existence. Cixous identifies this non-being as woman's normal condition within patriarchal thought: "Either woman is passive or she does not exist. What is left of her is unthinkable, unthought." Cixous, Hélène (1975) 'Sorties': in Cixous & Clément (1986) *op.cit.*, 64.

Her insistence on speaking truth - and thereby asserting her existence - thus makes Ariadne a very real threat to Theseus' order. Further, because she is female, she represents a challenge to the authority of his maleness as well as to his rule. To maintain his power he requires her silence. Since it will never be given willingly he enforces it, by removing her from the sphere of his existence: he leaves her on Naxos. Whereas Philomele has her tongue cut out to prevent her revealing the truth¹⁸, Ariadne is abandoned to become, literally, a voice crying in the wilderness.

The final scenes of the play move away from the ordinary, in both matter and manner. When Ariadne wakes, alone, she hears cymbals, singing, and dancing footsteps, and sees bathed in "unearthly light [...], young and radiant, crowned with vines, wrapped in a leopardskin, the god Dionysos." (TD: 146) The language shifts to verse, signalling clearly the status but importantly the 'otherness' of the god (as until this point all the characters - including the royal ones - speak in prose). Dionysos has come, he says, to give Ariadne the happiness available to all his followers through "divine intoxication"; in this way she will be freed from what he describes as her enslavement to false dichotomies of truth and lies, good and evil, black and white:

DIONYSOS: There is a Minotaur, Ariadne, and there is none. (TD: 146)

For Ariadne, Dionysos' words represent a temptation which must be resisted. Although she has found herself in a place cut off from all human society, she forces herself to hold on to what she believes to be the heart of human consciousness: an adherence to truth for its own sake.

The conflict of principle between Ariadne and Dionysos is expressed, significantly, through images of darkness and light. The 'paradise' Dionysos is offering her is shadowless, a world where all is light. It is this which makes it impossible for Ariadne to join him: "You throw no shadow. You're of a different kind. For me you don't exist." (147) She cannot accept a world where qualities are not understood in relation to their opposites; she cannot judge a being, an experience, or an idea which has no

¹⁸ See Chapter Three for a discussion of Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*, which also addresses this theme of the power of speech and of enforced silence.

shade. Ariadne's position is clear: darkness is necessary in order to reveal the light of truth. Implicitly, this has been her position throughout. All her life, she told Theseus, she lived "in the shadow of the Minotaur" (137); when this monster was revealed to her to be illusory, its place was taken by the unfathomable darkness of the labyrinth. Perhaps ironically, the extension of this position is that the labyrinth is necessary for Ariadne, too; the light of truth is recognised by its contrast with the dark nightmare of the maze. Ariadne's realisation that her father's authority is supported by a complex web of lies constitutes an awakening. From that moment on she can no longer plead innocence, or adopt a passive role.

As a gift, Dionysos gives Ariadne a second chance: an opportunity, perhaps, to revision her own mythology.¹⁹ The final scene of the play takes her "back three days in [...] human time", in other words leading us back to a replay of the very first scene of the drama. For the second time, Ariadne looks out from her window to see the victims arriving to be sacrificed; for the second time she determines that the ritual must stop. However, whereas the first scene closes with Ariadne leaving the room to confront her father, the play concludes in a way which both confirms and comments upon what has gone before:

(Frees herself from her nurse and slowly walks towards the door.)

NURSE: Where are you going?

ARIADNE: To Naxos. (TD: 150)

Ariadne thus chooses the same course, even though it is one which ultimately places her - in every sense - in a position of absolute isolation. Haasse appears to present

¹⁹ This sequence of *A Thread in the Dark* carries echoes, perhaps intentionally, of Sartre's *The Flies*. In Act III of Sartre's play Zeus appears to Orestes and Electra following the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus and offers them both a place on the throne in exchange for their penitence. Whereas Orestes steadfastly refuses to atone for an act he does not regard as a crime, Electra, terrified at the prospect of the Furies' vengeance, succumbs to the temptation to let Zeus rewrite her history for her. Zeus: "Surely you can trust my word. Do I not read men's hearts?" Electra: [*incredulously*] And you read in mine that I never really desired that crime? Though for fifteen years I dreamt of murder and revenge?" Zeus: "Bah! I know you nursed bloodthirsty dreams - but there was a sort of innocence about them. They made you forget your servitude, they healed your wounded pride. But you never really thought of making them come true [...]." Electra: [...] "Yes, yes! I'm beginning to understand." Orestes' reassertion of his commitment to his actions can thus be compared with Ariadne's in *A Thread in the Dark*; like Sartre, Haasse is concerned to examine characters not through qualities such as courage, honour and so on in an abstract sense, but in terms of their actions within specific situations. Sartre, Jean-Paul (1943) *The Flies*; in Sartre (1960) *Altona*; *Men Without Shadows*; *The Flies*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 306.

Ariadne's decision as the moral imperative, whilst implicitly acknowledging it as a position which her society cannot tolerate. Politically, therefore, the stance of the play becomes ambiguous, especially when within its social context it appears to invite its audience to reflect on the implications of their own individual and collective choices, past and present. Ariadne refuses to renounce the human world, yet she chooses isolation within it. She seeks a world where truth prevails, yet she will not go near enough to 'darkness' - will not risk being touched by it herself - to attempt to transform it.²⁰ However, this interpretation is possibly too limited. Whilst it is true that she effectively chooses exile, it is a decision taken when faced with restricted options and within a particular set of circumstances. Ariadne's insistence on truth may be 'heroic', but her rejection of the alternative offered her by Dionysos maintains her place firmly within the human - as opposed to superhuman - sphere. Nevertheless, Ariadne's decision does appear to confirm the 'inevitability' of the myth's outcome. As quoted earlier, she tells Phaedra early in the play that she had previously believed the state of fear her community lived in to be "unalterable" (TD: 99); it would seem that she has now learned that this is true. *A Thread in the Dark* thus protests against political corruption, yet is ultimately pessimistic about reform; the truth-seeker should expect - even volunteer²¹ - to be expelled from the community.

As a re-visioning of myth, *A Thread in the Dark* raises many issues which will resurface in later discussion, but also expresses attitudes which will be explicitly

²⁰ In this respect, *A Thread in the Dark* does seem to bear resemblance to Anouilh's *Antigone*, mentioned earlier. Both have young, idealistic heroines who reject any form of compromise, and both are presented with counter-arguments about the necessities of 'the real world'; Anouilh's Creon tells Antigone: "It is easy to say no. To say yes, you have to sweat and roll up your sleeves and plunge both hands into life up to the elbows. It is easy to say no, even if saying no means death. All you have to do is sit still and wait. Wait to go on living; wait to be killed. That is the coward's part." Anouilh (1981) *op.cit.*, 51. David Bradby has pointed out that *Antigone* is philosophically and politically ambiguous, noting that in its context it proved popular both with the Resistance and with Nazi sympathisers; he argues further that Anouilh's fatalism, expressed through the theatrical metaphor of the imperative of their allotted roles, means that Antigone's resistance is no free choice but ultimately becomes a meaningless refusal of life. Bradby, David (1991) *Modern French Drama 1940-1990*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 34-37.

²¹ If Ariadne is perceived in some senses as a scapegoat, it makes sense that she adopts this role willingly as historically the scapegoat was in fact very often a volunteer, in the ancient Greek culture in particular; however in those circumstances it was usual for the scapegoat to be honoured prior to the sacrifice, an aspect which seems incompatible with Ariadne's experience in *A Thread in the Dark*. Leach, Maria & Fried, Jerome eds. (1984) *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*. San Francisco, Harper & Row, 976.

challenged. The myth of Ariadne and Theseus becomes naturalised, is made determinedly ordinary, in order that the audience can be shown where ‘myth’ really lies: in the deception of the Minotaur, in the mask of bravura which leads Theseus to abandon the truth, and in the alluring paradise of the gods where good and evil lose their definition. Myth is presented as a labyrinth of lies which must be blasted open, exposed, in order to let in the light of truth. This enlightenment opposition of truth/light versus darkness/ignorance is a central principle which later examples I discuss will challenge, proposing that darkness may offer its own truths and that if we allow ourselves to become lost, we may discover that there are more ways out of the labyrinth than one.

“Tremate, tremate, le streghe sono tornate”²² : Franca Rame’s

The Same Old Story and Medea

Although the two short plays I discuss in this chapter were first produced in the late 1970s Franca Rame is a practitioner whose career in the Italian theatre began much earlier, which thus places her more or less as a contemporary of Hella Haasse, considered previously. She is one of Italy’s best-known actresses, both in her own right and in association with her partner Dario Fo, and her work - in particular, her collection of one-woman plays - has also proved popular abroad in professional and amateur contexts.²³ The two pieces *The Same Old Story* and *Medea* were written and performed by Rame in 1977 as part of a group of monologues collectively titled *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* (‘All home, bed and church’) which, as David Hirst notes, plays on the colloquial Italian phrase *tutto casa, lavoro e chiesa* (‘all home, work and church’), used to describe the preoccupations of the petit-bourgeois Italian.²⁴ The monologues were written in part as a response to the criticism - particularly levelled by the Italian feminist collectives - that until that time Rame’s and Fo’s jointly produced work for

²² “Tremble, tremble, the witches are back”: popular feminist slogan in Italy in the 1970s, quoted in Bassnett, Susan (1986) *Feminist Experiences: The Women’s Movement in Four Cultures*: London, Allen & Unwin, 95.

²³ Tony Mitchell notes that by the mid-1980s Rame’s collection of monologues had been produced in a variety of venues in Britain, Ireland, America, Canada and Australia, as well as in Italy. Mitchell ed. (1989) *op.cit.*, 62.

²⁴ Hirst, David L. (1989) *Dario Fo and Franca Rame*: London, Macmillan, 140.

theatre and television had, in its primary focus on class analysis, somewhat sidelined gender issues.²⁵ Interviewed in Italy's Marxist newspaper *Il manifesto* in the same year, Rame explained her own priorities:

One must take one's hat off to what the feminist movement has achieved. Feminists have made so many people understand so many things, and, thanks to their efforts, I too have a different relationship with my family. I, however, believe that the new condition of women depends on the transformation of society. First we have to change class relationships: I believe women's liberation is tied to the class struggle. And, as well, we need to change men, make them learn and discover and respect our dignity. Then finally women will be really free.²⁶

Such a statement identifies Rame broadly as a socialist feminist, in her insistence that women's experiences cannot be understood without reference to their specific class context. As Sue-Ellen Case has pointed out, Rame's work recognises no concept of patriarchy as such, but rather represents male privilege as an extension of capitalist principles of ownership and exploitation²⁷; her plays therefore seek to expose the myths - the ideological narratives - which support and thus serve to perpetuate a system based on fundamental social inequalities.

(i) *The Same Old Story*

The Same Old Story focuses primarily on issues of sexual responsibility. The monologue is made up of two clearly-defined parts. In the first, we witness a complex chain of events which culminates in a woman giving birth to a baby girl; the second part consists of an enacted 'fairy story' supposedly related by the mother to the daughter. The two parts of the monologue are used to comment on each other; both deal with male-female relations, sexuality and sexual responsibility, but where the first does this semi-realistically, the second escapes into a subversive fantasy world where utopian alternatives can be playfully explored. The use of the fairytale is highly significant, as it draws attention directly to the notion of myth-making in such a way that the audience recognises that in fact suspiciously similar processes were at work in the 'real life' we

²⁵ *Ibid*, 141-42.

²⁶ *Il manifesto*, 25 Nov 1977: quoted *ibid*, 146.

²⁷ Case, Sue-Ellen (1988) *Feminism and Theatre*: London, Macmillan, 92.

witnessed in the first half of the play.

As the play begins we see a woman stretched out on a rostrum, apparently in the middle of a somewhat unsatisfactory session of lovemaking:

No, no, please... please... keep still... not like that, I can't breathe. Wait.. Yes of course I like making love, but I'd like a bit more... well I don't know how to put it... you're squashing me flat... Get off me... Stop that! (SOS: 49)

It is immediately evident that the woman and her unseen male partner want different things from this sexual encounter. Rame represents the woman as wanting "a bit of feeling" while her partner - according to her - treats her like "a bloody pinball machine... just slap 50p in the slot and all the lights start flashing and zing, ting, zing... bang bang wham!!". (SOS: 49) That the couple's sexual relations are a reflection of the oppressive class system which both are engaged in fighting within the public sphere is made explicit. When the man's lovemaking becomes gentler and the act of sex more truly reciprocal she finds him "almost a comrade" (SOS: 50), but when he is "turned off" by her fear of pregnancy she denounces him for the narrow limits of his vision of equality:

And you're supposed to be a 'comrade'? Give me a break! Do you know what sort of comrade you are? You're a dick's comrade! Yessirree! That's what you think with! [...] Now I come to examine it, it's got a cardinal's hat on! And a general's stripes... and it's doing a bloody Heil Hitler salute! (SOS: 51)

Rame reveals that the man has signally failed to extend his political radicalism of the workplace to acknowledge the exploitation inherent in his sexual relationships with women. He ignores his partner's urgent insistence that he take care, obeys the imperative of his own sexual desire, and she becomes pregnant as a result.

From a situation where she has been exploited by her lover, the woman finds that she is to be further exploited by the medical profession when she goes to seek an abortion. She explains her nervousness to the nurse by referring to her previous experience of a backstreet abortion; after the agony of being "wide awake and fully conscious" as well as being treated like dirt, she has decided this time to get it done 'properly'. (SOS: 52) However, on learning the extortionate fee, she speculates that the profession knows

very well what it is about: the same gynaecologists who ‘conscientiously object’ to practising abortions in hospital can overcome their scruples to carry them out for private clients with money to pay. In rebellion against this practice, she decides not to go ahead with the abortion.

While Gillian Hanna in the English translation of *The Same Old Story* has made a number of alterations to the text to suggest this scene’s relevance within the context of the UK – with references to the NHS, David Steel and the liberal abortion law of 1967²⁸ – Rame was originally making a direct comment on the repressive Italian abortion laws which have been a central issue for the Italian feminist movement (and clearly one which cuts across differences of background). The culturally influential group Rivolta Femminile, founded in 1970, made this statement in their original manifesto:

Woman’s first reason for resentment against society lies in being forced to face maternity as a dilemma. We denounce the unnatural nature of a maternity paid for at a cost of exclusion. The refusal of the freedom of abortion is part of the global denial of women’s autonomy. We do not wish to think about motherhood all our lives or to continue to be unwitting instruments of patriarchal power.²⁹

Statistics from the Rivolta Femminile claimed that in the early seventies between one and three million women were having clandestine abortions each year³⁰, risking their lives as well as the likelihood of civil and religious ostracism. Following years of demonstrations which brought together women from politically diverse groups, a law was passed in 1977 (the same year as Rame’s performance) which legalised abortion, yet which was still highly restrictive. Women continued to campaign publicly for deeper reforms, with slogans like *Aborto sì, me non finisce qui* (‘Abortion yes, but it doesn’t stop here’).³¹

Rame’s character in *The Same Old Story* finds herself caught in the frustrations and

²⁸ Hanna, Gillian (1991) Introduction to Rame and Fo (1991) *op.cit.*, 4.

²⁹ Bono, Paola & Kemp, Sandra (1991) *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 38.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 214.

³¹ Quoted in Bassnett (1986) *op.cit.*, 95.

contradictions of the Italian legal and medical systems as well as in the straitjacket of gender expectations, a situation which would have been immediately familiar to the women in her contemporary audience. In her attempt to break free of the abortion trap, she succumbs to an alternative myth:

I'm going to keep it. (*She has finally made her decision.*) I'm going to fulfil myself!... (*She is ecstatic. At the top of her voice.*) I'm going to fulfil myself!!! (*She shouts happily.*) Motherhood! Motherhood!! Motherho-o-o-d!!! (SOS: 53)

We are instantly taken on a whirlwind tour of the ups and downs of pregnancy moving from ecstasy, to pain and anger, to a fantasy of reversal where it is the man who has become pregnant ("a man only fulfils himself when he becomes a MOTHER!") to the moment where she herself gives birth to a girl whom she urges: "Grow up, come on!" (SOS: 54-55) It is at this point in the monologue that Rame's character explicitly adopts a storytelling role as she begins to relate what turns out to be a very educational fairytale for her daughter's - and the audience's - entertainment.

From its opening lines we realise that this tale, not unlike Angela Carter's 'The Company of Wolves', is very much a story *about* fairy stories.³² Rame makes use of the ritualised language of storytelling, in order to subvert it:

[O]nce upon a time there was a dear sweet little girl who had a beautiful dolly. Well, to tell you the truth the dolly wasn't beautiful at all; she was filthy dirty [and] used the most terrible bad swear words... (SOS: 55)

If the dolly isn't really beautiful, it's implied, maybe the little girl will similarly turn out to be less dear and sweet than first suggested. Through this character juxtaposition Rame represents an image of conformity to a socially approved feminine type and at the same time a rebellion against it³³; that one of the two is a doll suggests clearly that its 'bad behaviour' is the result of an act of displacement by the child. The doll's readiness

³² See Chapter Four for a discussion of the self-referential aspects of Carter's story.

³³ Whilst as noted earlier Rame's work does not acknowledge the existence of a patriarchy as such, a comment from Morag Shiach (actually discussing Cixous) provides a helpful perspective on the 'split' of girl and doll. In her extreme 'femininity' the girl represents a patriarchal ideal, yet as Shiach states "the putting-in-place of patriarchy [...] generates anger, excess, a voice that seems to escape control and instead goes underground..."; this is an apt description of the doll whose voice is literally an outpouring of rage and obscenity, although this is framed to provoke laughter as much as shock from the audience. Shiach, Morag (1991) *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing*: London, Routledge, 14.

to speak what the little girl represses brings instant punishment as she is flung by the girl's mother onto a rubbish heap, literally a social outcast.

As it continues, the story that is told seems to have shades of 'Little Red Riding Hood' - little girls, dark woods, wolves - but more accurately it is an amalgam of tales, and ultimately an anti-fairytale. The doll experiences a brief period of adventure with a bad red cat while the little girl, who very quickly grows up, chooses marriage with an ex-wolf turned handsome computer-programmer. Despite their differences, both experiences are used as illustrations of sexual inequality and both implicitly refer back to the events of the first half of the piece. The 'red cat' symbolises the leftist man with whom the woman can have "a decent political argy-bargy" (SOS: 58) but who nevertheless exploits her in the home; the grown-up little girl's marriage, on the other hand, represents, as the doll later observes, a state of mindless acceptance:

[Y]ou sit here twiddling your thumbs till he comes home in the evening... then he throws you straight on the bed and it's bonk bonk bonk again! (SOS: 58)

The previously contented husband naturally resents the doll's trouble-stirring, and attempts to punish her by using her as toilet paper, a ploy she swiftly counteracts by disappearing up his bottom. This truly bizarre scenario leads to a repetition of the 'pregnant man' fantasy from the first half. A midwife is called in to help the man give birth who, on seeing him, roars with laughter, declaring: "It's going to be a difficult birth! It's in the breech position, feet first!" (SOS: 59) The enchanted potion - her own urine - that the midwife gives the man to drink does take effect; the doll is released, but the man explodes in the process. The girl picks up the doll and hugs her until "little by little the dolly vanishes into her heart" (SOS: 60), signalling a realisation that the artificial split which has kept these very different femininities apart is no longer acceptable.

The final sequence of the story shows the girl setting off by herself until she comes upon a group of other "grown-up little girls" sitting under a tree telling stories: "'When I was very small I had a rag dolly who used to say the most terrible dirty words.' 'So did I'... 'So did I'" (SOS: 60); the story of one turns out, in the end, to be the story of them all. This closing image of the group of women sharing experiences suggests a

form of consciousness-raising, the term for which in Italy at that time was *autocoscienza*, which perhaps stresses more than the Anglo-American term the self-directed quality of the process of developing personal and political awareness.³⁴ In *The Same Old Story* the telling of the little girl's coming to maturity and her discovery of friends who have the same experiences - a scene of female solidarity denied the woman character in the first half of the monologue - is designed to provoke a related response from the women in her audience. What are their stories? Have they recognised that in many cases their 'personal' experiences are broadly shared by women as a class, and thus have a political base? What strength might come from this awareness? While the monologue clearly aims to explore a female perspective, Rame sees the piece as a salutary lesson for men too, who in her view need educating; in her commentary to the Italian audience she draws attention to the laughter of any men present, saying:

[T]ake note, you women here in the theatre, the male's laugh has nothing human about it! They laugh out of time, they laugh without reason. And then they come out with a really fantastic remark: 'I'm laughing because I'm not one of them over there. I'm a feminist too!' As far as I'm concerned the feminist male ought to be strangled at birth.³⁵

Provocations of this type are very much in keeping with the kind of performer-audience relationship Rame maintains more or less throughout the performance of this monologue, a dynamic in which the deconstruction of myth forms a key part. Continually, Rame makes use of the familiar phraseology of the fairytale but in order to subvert it, as in "They got married and lived happily ever, ever after. The very next day..." (SOS: 57); such a strategy uses ritualised formulae to invite the audience's attention, then twists it to gain the laughter which comes as a recognition of its limitations in dealing with actual, lived experience. Similarly Rame introduces certain repeated motifs, such as the phrase "It's a well-known fact..." which will then be followed by an assertion, for example, that computer programmers' farts are deadly poisonous to dwarfs (SOS: 57). Such lines aim to provoke laughter, but within the piece as a whole are also designed to draw attention to the whole process of myth-making: what 'well-known facts' about gender relations have we come to accept, regardless of whether or not they have any valid foundation? *The Same Old Story* is insistent that an

³⁴ Bono & Kemp (1991) *op.cit.*, 8-9.

³⁵ Hirst (1989) *op.cit.*, 147-48.

audience examine its own fairytales - in all aspects of social experience - and opens the debate by offering one witty and provocative alternative to conventional wisdom.

(ii) *Medea*

Medea, another monologue presented as part of *Tutto casa, letto e chiesa*, addresses similar issues but in a strikingly different manner. Whereas *The Same Old Story* examines myths of gender and class relations through a deconstruction of 'fairy tale' in a broad sense, with *Medea* Rame tackles a specific and notorious story from classical mythology head-on. Medea's history is highly complex³⁶, but in her monologue Rame limits her focus to one particular episode: when Medea, learning that her husband Jason is about to take a new bride and that she herself will be exiled, kills the two children born from their marriage. Euripides' tragedy written in the fifth century BCE also takes this section of the myth and, as a result of its influence, Medea has become better known to us as a child-killer than for any other reason.³⁷ It is worth noting, however, that Rame's *Medea* is inspired less by Euripides' play than by a popular Italian version of the Medea story which originated in Magna Grecia.³⁸ When performing the monologue Rame adopts the dialect of that region which creates the effect, as Gillian Hanna notes, of "a woman rooted in the earth, in reality"³⁹; it also presents an image of Medea as an outsider both socially and culturally, a choice which echoes the emphasis within classical mythology on her low status as a barbarian.⁴⁰

In taking the Medea myth as a basis for re-vision, and as a part of her project of urging

³⁶ See for example Robert Bell's account of Medea's exploits in Bell (1991) *Women of Classical Mythology*: Oxford, Oxford University Press, 292-96.

³⁷ By contrast, Barbara Walker (1995) stresses Medea's great wisdom, and particularly her skill as a healer (her name relates to "medicine"); there is a brief reference to her "ill-starred marriage to Jason", but no mention of the murder of her children. This is in keeping with the general aim of Walker's study, which is "to uncover precisely what other encyclopedias leave out or misrepresent" (back cover), a laudable project but one which could perhaps be criticised for avoidance of elements which appear insufficiently 'positive'. Walker, Barbara (1995) *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*: London, Pandora, 628-29.

³⁸ Mitchell, Tony (1986) *Dario Fo: People's Court Jester*: London, Methuen, 81.

³⁹ Hanna, Gillian (1991) Introduction to Rame and Fo (1991) *op.cit.*, 4.

⁴⁰ See Euripides' *Medea* (c.430BCE), ll 536-7: Euripides, trans. Hadas, Moses & McLean, John (1981) *Ten Plays by Euripides*: Toronto & New York, Bantam, 44.

“respect for women everywhere: at home, in the street, in the family and in bed”⁴¹ , Rame is accepting a difficult challenge. It is one thing to feel pity or anger for Medea’s position as a foreign wife pushed aside to make room for a new, more socially acceptable bride (and indeed Euripides’ play demands a degree of sympathy for her ill-treatment), but quite another to find grounds to justify the murder of the children. It would be naive to claim Medea as a feminist heroine on the basis of her fierce resistance to the oppressive patriarchal system, overlooking or else condoning the form that this resistance takes. Instead, Rame stresses that the point of her version of the story is “not jealousy or rage but a new awareness, the taking of a moral stand”⁴² , and within this project the killing becomes a symbol of the necessity for women to sever the ties society insists bind a mother to her offspring, and which demand that she be willing to sacrifice her own needs ‘for their good’. The killing may still be a hard pill to swallow but it becomes understandable within the frame of the play, and as a companion piece to *The Same Old Story* (and within *Tutto casa, letto e chiesa* as a whole) it provides a further perspective from a very different angle on mythologies of motherhood, so deeply embedded within the dominant ideologies of Italian society.

The only speaking characters within Rame’s *Medea* are the women of the chorus and Medea herself, with these roles all taken by the one performer. As the female chorus here echo the familiar function of choruses within the Greek tragic theatre of voicing conventional wisdom, and asserting the importance of moderation - in marked contrast to the passionate stance of the protagonist - Rame’s monologue is already structurally provocative: the rebel and the conformist become literally two faces of the same actress (a strategy which itself challenges too simplistic a reading of her Medea as ‘role model’ for contemporary women).

The play opens with the female chorus in a state of high excitement: Medea’s husband is taking a younger woman as a new bride, and Medea “just won’t face up to it”, she “won’t listen to reason”. (M: 61) These opening speeches from the chorus establish the situation succinctly; it is men’s right and women’s expectation that the status of wife is

⁴¹ Rame, quoted in Hanna (1991) ‘Performing in the Mirror’: Rame and Fo (1991) *op.cit.*, xv.

⁴² Rame, quoted in Hirst (1989) *op.cit.*, 151.

only temporary, and when a woman has outstayed her welcome within her master's house she should go quietly, "for the sake of the children". (M: 61) It quickly becomes apparent that it is the relationship between mother and children which is the crux of it, and which is at the heart of Rame's re-visioning of the myth. The chorus reason that Medea's children will be better off if the proposed marriage goes ahead, as Jason's status (and therefore theirs) will rise; there will be more money, plentiful food, better clothes... Medea's anger at being pensioned off is thus seen by the chorus as an indication of her selfishness, since a good mother - a normal mother - should be ready to make sacrifices for the sake of her children.

When Medea is finally persuaded to emerge from her house, we are told that she is hoarse from screaming. The actress as chorus member bends down to give her a glass of water, then transforms to take on Medea's role. Her first words present a character very different from the virago we have been warned to expect:

Friends... my dear women friends... what does my husband's new girlfriend look like? I've only seen her once, and that was in the distance. I thought she looked... so beautiful... so young... (M: 62)

The tone seems one of despair. As Medea nostalgically recalls her own youthful beauty - a pre-pregnancy ideal of slender, firm-fleshed, virgin fragility - the chorus attempt to join her for a moment of mutual commiseration; all of them have been through that stage and, once aged, all have been traded in for 'new models': "it's the law of nature". (M: 63)

It is this phrase, this acceptance of the legitimacy of female inferiority, which prompts a revival of Medea's anger and which is the starting-point for the playwright's deconstruction of gender norms. Medea counters "nature" with culture in her challenge to the chorus: whose *interests* does such a law serve? However, the women appear immune to her arguments, and have ready answers to justify the *status quo*:

Men get older slower than us. They ripen as they get older, we wither... we swell up and then we fade away... they get wiser and more mature. We lose our power and they grow more powerful... that's the rule that makes the world go

round.

(M: 63)⁴³

Through the chorus' rationalisations and Medea's furious response, Rame reveals the workings of the patriarchal hegemony: for a system which is fundamentally based on inequality to continue and prosper, it is vital a belief is fostered, in those whom it benefits least, that that system is both necessary and fair. *Medea* thus offers no equivalent for the *autocoscienza* represented in *The Same Old Story*; the female chorus' support for Medea has no radical edge, but rather is rooted in the belief that they should help each other come to terms with woman's lot. The reward for submission is the promise of a peaceful life; rebellion invites the risk of losing even that. Yet for Medea a life bought by bowing one's head is no life at all. She is left alone in the house "like a corpse" while others are celebrating - "and they haven't even buried me yet". (M: 64) Medea's words echo those of Haasse's Ariadne, where again acquiescence is the equivalent of "non-being, death" (TD: 139), but whilst in *A Thread in the Dark* Ariadne is exiled by force, here Medea is asked to embrace exile as a duty.

Medea realises, therefore, that she must fight the attitudes of women as well as those of men. It is the recognition of the full extent of her friends' complicity with the patriarchal system that leads her to the decision that she must kill her children, thereby striking out against society's moral blackmail. As Marina Warner argues in her own analysis of the myth, maternity is for Medea the terrain of the only authority left to her "and so she strikes at Jason where he is most vulnerable, and where his reach - and all men's - is weakest"; in doing so she must suppress maternal love, that fundamental criterion of femininity.⁴⁴ Rame's Medea accepts the outrage she invites on herself by her actions, drawing attention in this speech to the very processes of myth-making:

Oh sure, I know I'll always be remembered as a wicked mother, a woman who was driven out of her mind by jealousy... but it's better to be remembered as a wild animal than forgotten like a pet nanny goat! Milk her, clip her, then throw her out. Send her to market and sell her... she won't even make a single bleat in protest! (M: 64)

⁴³ Extreme as the chorus' position seems, it is nevertheless one which is still reflected today in the media and in many women's and young girls' magazines, where attractive older women are admired wherever they succeed in looking younger than their true age, and where beauty advice emphasises the need to 'correct flaws' in the struggle to achieve an established ideal.

⁴⁴ Warner, Marina (1994) *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time*: London, Vintage, 7.

The first words offer a direct challenge to the audience: how shall they choose to remember this unnatural mother, this monster of myth? How should her crime be understood? Where *The Same Old Story* comically parodies motherhood as ‘fulfilment’ (SOS: 53), *Medea* paints it starkly as the end of woman’s life. Medea’s choice is thus a consequence of her refusal to relinquish the right to live.

The female chorus’ panic in reaction to Medea’s announcement is quelled by the arrival of Jason – whom the audience does not see. What we *do* see is an abrupt transformation as the actress shows Medea covering her rage with the mask of submission: “[I]t’s all right... I was only joking.[...] I’m quite lucid now.” (M: 65) As she condemns her own earlier behaviour, the irony of her self-accusation should hit the audience hard:

I can’t think what got into me, saying this law men have made, that lets you trade in one woman for another, was a kind of blackmail! [...] Whatever put the thought into my head that you’d chained our children around our necks like millstones to keep us in our places [...]? (M: 66)

However, Medea’s newly-found clarity of vision does not prompt her to docility, as Jason and the chorus hope; instead it leads her to reassert her ‘irrational’ anger and to act upon it, in order to challenge her society’s very definition of what it is to be rational.

There can be no doubt that Medea’s act, in its apparent perversion of the maternal bond, has profound resonances for contemporary society.⁴⁵ In my discussion of *The Same Old Story* I have already made reference to the issue of abortion, stressing its topicality and extreme controversiality within the social context of Italy in the 1970s. A further slogan from feminist marches and rallies of the time – *Non più madri, non più figlie, distruggiamo le famiglie* (“No longer mothers, no longer daughters, we’re going to

⁴⁵ Obviously it is not only within the latter part of the twentieth century that this bond has been challenged. For example, many nineteenth-century *fin-de-siècle* social critics perceived a threat to the supposed sanctity of the mother-child relationship inherent in the desire of modern women for greater freedom, and hence a threat to the fabric of Western society. August Forel (1906) stated that “[t]he modern tendency of women to become pleasure-seekers, and to take a dislike to maternity, leads to a degeneration of society itself”. In a similar vein, Caesar Lombroso and William Ferrero (1899) claimed that “[w]hen piety and maternal sentiment are wanting, and in their place are strong passions and intensely erotic tendencies [...], it is clear that the innocuous semi-criminal present in the normal woman must be transformed into a born criminal more terrible than any man”. Kaplan, Louise (1993) *Female Perversions*: Harmondsworth, Penguin, 408-9. Rame’s Medea is not selfish, a “pleasure-seeker” in Forel’s terms, but she is ‘self-centred’ in that she fights as a human being; in doing so, her actions *do* constitute a threat to the social structure of which she is a part.

destroy families”)⁴⁶ - illustrates the anger within the women’s movement and reveals the myth of Medea as particularly pertinent to contemporary concerns; despite its difference in style and tone from the other plays within *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa*, *Medea* is no less direct in its political intent. Medea recognises that the women of the chorus are really speaking the truth when they identify the power imbalance between men and women as “the rule that makes the world go round” (M: 63), and by her actions she attempts to break this cycle, to strike a blow at the heart of the machine, to stop the world.

In this discussion I have examined just two of Rame’s monologues, the two which deal most directly with myth both as traditional tale and as ideological narrative. From this alone it should be clear that any analysis of the meanings of Rame’s theatre must take into consideration the effect for the audience of the juxtaposition of different monologues, rather than focussing too exclusively on any individual piece. The themes of *The Same Old Story* and *Medea* recur throughout *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa*, presented through farce, irony, tragedy or the grotesque, as each one demands. The audience is guided through the event as a whole both by Rame’s introductions to each piece, to which I’ve referred, and by the very accessibility of the plays themselves in terms of their verbal and visual language. The introductions serve the functions both of making explicit the author/performer’s own intentions and of drawing attention to the continuity provided by Rame as sole performer, the latter a point emphasised by Gillian Hanna:

When Franca Rame performs the plays in Italy she is already well known in her own right. Her audience is aware of her history as a political being as well as an actress. She appears on the stage bringing with her the ghost of three decades of political activity, and everyone in the audience, be it in a theatre or sports stadium or factory is familiar with that. So whichever character she is playing, her audience recognises her within all her characters.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Quoted in Bassnett (1986) *op.cit.*, 95.

⁴⁷ Hanna, in Rame and Fo (1991) *op.cit.*, xvi. It is worth noting, however, that when Rame’s plays are performed separately rather than as a collection, by other actresses, and in different cultural contexts, their political impact may well be significantly impaired. Tony Mitchell has noted Rame’s own reservations about the National Theatre’s production of the monologues in 1981; she felt that the naturalistic detail included obscured the plays’ intended didacticism, commenting: “We always try to eliminate the superstructure, the excess, because the most important thing is the content. [Ours] is a theatrical choice which is epic rather than naturalistic.” Mitchell, Tony (1986) *Dario Fo: People’s Court Jester*. London, Methuen, 106.

Rame's characters are thus illustrations of the issues she is known to be concerned with as a political activist, and the provocative juxtaposition of characters makes it clear that she is offering her audience the many and sometimes contradictory faces of these issues, rather than a gallery of 'role model' solutions. Rame's monologues challenge her audience, but this is the challenge of tackling the problems facing women in contemporary society and unravelling the complexity of political, ethical and psychological threads which entrap them, not the challenge of deciphering the meanings of the plays themselves. Indeed, her work is designed with accessibility in mind, to communicate as directly as possible with the broad range of spectators she aims to reach. As Rame's foremost concern is with the explicit examination of ideological content, her work places little emphasis on aesthetic experimentation as such. However, the subversive potential of the performance strategies required by *Tutto casa, letto e chiesa* as a whole should not be underestimated. Individual pieces demand that the performer should have the ability to shift perspectives fluidly - *The Same Old Story* is an extreme example of this - and this multiplicity is clearly intensified when a series of monologues is presented. Rame as solo performer is the locus where these meet: the well-behaved little girl and the foul-mouthed doll, the passive chorus and the rebel Medea; likewise her theatre speaks to men as well as women in the audience, to the liberal and radical, in a feminist project which advocates accessibility and open debate with the goal of effecting direct social change.

“And she stopped the world”: Sarah Daniels’ *Neaptide*

Sarah Daniels' *Neaptide*, first performed at the National Theatre in London in 1986, is an example of a feminist re-visioning which directly represents and addresses issues relevant to contemporary society, and in which myth operates as an implicit subtext. The play deals centrally with the struggle of a lesbian mother, Claire, to retain custody of her daughter. Interwoven with this narrative are others: Claire's sister Val suffers a nervous breakdown; at the girls' school where Claire is a teacher, two pupils 'come out' and are threatened with expulsion. Joyce, mother to Claire, Val and Sybil (a third daughter the audience does not meet, living in America), tries with difficulty to come to terms with her offspring's lives, commenting bitterly: "I wanted three daughters like the

Brontës and I ended up with a family fit for a Channel Four documentary.” (N: 247)

The classical myth of Demeter and Persephone is introduced as a parallel to the central narrative and is used primarily as a metaphorical expression of the battle between mother and father for custody of the daughter. At this level, the relevance of the myth to the contemporary situation is hinted at rather than stated. However, the myth is also introduced into the play explicitly, as the favoured bedtime story of Poppy, Claire’s daughter. In Daniels’ version, Demeter has four daughters. Poppy assigns all these roles to her own family members, leaving the audience in no doubt of the author’s intention to suggest a connection between the myth and the social reality of the play: the grandmother, Joyce, is Demeter, with Sybil, Val and Claire as Athena, Psyche and Artemis respectively; Poppy herself is Persephone. When Joyce’s husband Sid arrives, his granddaughter casts him as Zeus. (N: 248-49)

It is perhaps Daniels’ use of such devices as this explicit ‘casting’ which leads Katharine Worth to say of *Neptune* that “[t]he myth is appliqué to the contemporary situation rather than embodied in it.”⁴⁸ In support of this observation, it is true that at points the ‘parallel’ seems awkward: a spectator with a knowledge of the myth might be confused that it is Joyce rather than Claire who is identified as the Demeter figure, particularly as it is Claire who is primarily concerned with the battle for custody of Poppy/Persephone; secondly, the casting of Sybil, Claire and Val to their respective roles appears more or less arbitrary⁴⁹; finally, the play devotes a good deal of attention to episodes which are not obviously related to the myth, such as the school’s refusal to acknowledge publicly the reality of lesbianism despite the fact that the headmistress is herself gay. With these factors in mind, Worth’s appliqué metaphor appears apt; the use of the Demeter/Persephone myth is not in fact a subtext - it does not operate as an undercurrent - but at points seems stitched on to the contemporary narrative.

⁴⁸ Worth, Katharine (1989) ‘Images of Women in Modern English Theater’; in Brater, Enoch ed.(1989) *Feminine Focus*: New York, Oxford University Press, 15.

⁴⁹ Having said that, certain links could be suggested: for example, the names Athena and Sybil both mean wisdom (however there is no indication of the appropriateness of this for the character). My feeling, though, is that as these roles are assigned briefly and are not referred to again, it is unlikely that meaningful connections could be made by an audience.

Nevertheless, the several plot lines within *Neaptide* can be connected together by the broad theme of women's relationships with one another, ultimately stressing female solidarity. This seems appropriate in a re-visioning of a myth seen by many as an archetypal expression of the feminine principle.⁵⁰ It is a theme articulated through Claire's battle for her daughter, the support of her heterosexual flatmate Jean, Claire's willingness to risk the security of her own position to stand by the schoolgirls Diane and Terri, and the guarded friendliness of the headmistress towards Claire. Finally, however, it is the changing attitude of Joyce which most forcefully expresses this theme. Comically (and to some extent stereotypically) represented as an old-fashioned figure whose ideas about sex and marriage are built on cliché - "You have a marvellous husband and a lovely family, sometimes I think you don't realise how lucky you are" (N: 248) - Joyce expresses a mixture of incomprehension and distaste that her daughter identifies herself as a lesbian. Daniels goes to considerable lengths to contrast the old order, here represented by Joyce, with the new order demonstrated by Claire - an exemplary single mother⁵¹ - and her bringing up of Poppy. Nevertheless, despite Claire's exasperation with Joyce's prejudices, she is to learn that the bond between mother and daughter is stronger for Joyce than the necessity of approving or even understanding Claire's sexuality:

JOYCE: [...] But when all's said and done, I'm still your mother and nothing is going to be able to change that for either of us.

CLAIRE: (*smiles*) No.

JOYCE: And sleepless nights won't change anything, so I said to myself, Joyce, I said, worrying won't make it go away, get off your behind and do something, so I went to the top set of chambers they call them to find a solicitor. (N: 317-18)

Recognising that the publicity around the lesbianism within Claire's school will further jeopardise her daughter's custody case, Joyce formulates a plan which is hinted at by the solicitor she contacts. This is that Claire and Poppy should skip the country, and join Joyce's third (unseen) daughter, Sybil, in America.

⁵⁰ See for example Christine Downing ed. (1994) *The Long Journey Home: Re-Visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for Our Time*: Boston, Shambhala.

⁵¹ In relation to this, Daniels states: "Claire in *Neaptide* suffers slightly from [...] authorial self-censorship. For, like Radclyffe Hall, *vis à vis* her heroine in *The Well of Loneliness*, I was so aware of the prejudice which exists against lesbians that I made Claire a bit too good and/or 'right on' to be true. I was determined not to provide anyone with an excuse for thinking 'Perhaps her ex-husband should have got custody anyway'." Daniels (1991) *op.cit.*, xi.

The implications of Joyce's behaviour make it apparent why it is she who is identified as Demeter within the context of the play. Joyce mourns the 'loss' of her daughters, one to a distant country, one to a dark mental realm - another form of underworld - which Joyce cannot reach; the third has gone "the other way" from the familiar patterns of the traditional family. (N: 246-47) Now, the happiness of her daughter's daughter is under threat. Joyce cannot allow Poppy and her mother to be pulled apart so proposes an all-or-nothing strategy, rejecting any version of the split year associated with the myth. Despite Claire's initial resistance to the plan, she takes her mother's advice. As a result she gets Poppy all to herself, yet in reality both Claire and Joyce are making a sacrifice:

CLAIRE: [...] It's not what I want.

JOYCE: I don't want it either but it seemed to me that only by letting go of the two of you could any sort of solution be found. (N: 320)

In this re-visioning of the myth the 'solution' means that whilst the women involved must still resign themselves to partial loss, as indicated above, Poppy/Persephone is held safe within a supportive female circle, protected from the threat of abduction by the male. The play concludes with a juxtaposition of the ex-husband, Lawrence's, furious knocking on the door of Claire's house, from which she and Poppy have now departed, with the scene at the hospital where Joyce has arrived to escort Val back home: thus two daughters are protected by Demeter.

Claire's escape with her daughter, and the relationship of this to the Demeter and Persephone myth, can be read in a variety of ways. Katharine Worth sees this turn of the plot as an illustration of Daniels' refusal to accept half measures, an interpretation which stems from a perception of the myth as one centred on rape:

Demeter's grief over her daughter's rape and her successful strategy for reclaiming the girl gives Daniels the main line of action in her play. What she does not take over from the myth is its acceptance of rape as a necessary part of a cyclic seasonal process: Persephone comes back to her mother in the spring but must pass the winter underground.⁵²

Whilst this is clearly not the only possible reading of the myth, it is one which ties in

⁵² Worth (1989) *op.cit.*, 14.

closely with the version as told by to Poppy by her mother. (N: 238-40) Claire's spiriting away of Poppy, urged by Joyce, thus literally 'breaks the cycle' not of the seasons, but of compromise and emotional violence. A comparison might be drawn here with Rame's *Medea*, discussed previously. Medea is told by the chorus that women's acceptance of the fact that they lose power - here equated with beauty - as they get older, whilst men's power grows, is "the rule that makes the world go round" (M: 63); when Medea recognises the force of this she withholds her acceptance, thus halting the oppressive cycle and 'freezing with horror' all who witness her act. In *Neaptide*, Claire relates the Demeter myth to Poppy:

CLAIRE: 'Yea, if that be the natural fate of daughters, let all mankind perish.
 Let there be no crops, no grain, no corn, if this maiden is not returned to
 me.'
 And she stopped the world.
 POPPY: Brillo, that's my favourite bit. (D: 239)

Yet whilst the resolution of the myth - which balances winter with summer, darkness with light and male with female - could arguably be perceived as a compromise, *Neaptide* as we have seen takes a different tack. As a lesbian re-visioning, it creates a new pattern which thus implicitly challenges the universality of the archetype.

Viewed from this perspective, it becomes apparent that the myth of Demeter and Persephone is particularly apt for Daniels' purposes. Christine Downing states that

[t]he love between Demeter and Persephone has been felt by many to symbolize not only the mother-daughter bond but more generally the intense, intimate connections among women whose loyalty to one another takes precedence over their relationships with men.⁵³

This seems to be in the spirit of *Neaptide*, which views the issue of the rights of lesbian mothers in terms of a wider framework of female relationships. Indeed it could be argued that within the play lesbianism becomes more of a symbol of female solidarity than a represented sexual and social practice. Claire identifies herself as lesbian but has no sexual partner, a decision made by Daniels in order to show that Claire's case in the custody battle is as favourable as it could be, in the circumstances; there is no character

⁵³ Downing, in Downing ed. (1994) *op.cit.*, 136.

to whom the court can attach blame.⁵⁴ The problem with this, however, is that lesbianism remains somewhat shadowy, a dissident attitude rather than realised desire; similarly, the headmistress' long-term 'companion', Florrie, is not seen, and of the two schoolgirls, Diane and Terri, only the former clearly asserts a lesbian identity. Thus *Neaptide* broadens its enquiry to address more general questions of women's relationships and society's prejudices, and in doing so arguably represents lesbianism as incidental rather than central. Daniels' use of the myth is thus ambiguous, in my view, as it appears to shift between offering an analogue of mother-daughter relationships, to female relationships in general, to specifically lesbian relationships; this ambiguity is expressed within Claire's retelling of the myth to Poppy, where she relates that the "world's first children" - Persephone, Psyche, Athena and Artemis - were all "passionately in love" with their mother. (N: 238)

While Claire's and Poppy's flight to America - the 'new world' - can be seen as a dynamic breaking of the pattern of submission to the patriarchal, heterosexual principle, this turn of the plot can also be criticised as - literally - a form of escapism on the author's part. Trevor Griffiths states that the play has "a legitimate fairy-tale ending" but one which "also suggests that there is no point in fighting here and [which] displaces the struggle into a utopian realm".⁵⁵ Daniels has stated that, as a playwright, she likes challenges: "I write issue plays."⁵⁶ Given this, Griffiths' criticism that prejudice against lesbian mothers is seemingly presented by Daniels as a 'fact of life' within mid-1980s British society, rather than as something which can be overcome, perhaps has some legitimacy. Michelene Wandor challenges what she identifies as the "passive radical feminist dynamic" of Daniels' theatre, present in *Neaptide* and elsewhere, whereby the differences between male and female are essentialised and thus women cannot hope to beat the patriarchal system. There's no point in fighting when, as Joyce says, "you're up to your neck in quicksand". (N: 320) Wandor suggests that it is this degree of acceptance of societal injustice which can actually make the work of

⁵⁴ Goodman, Lizbeth (1993) *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*: London, Routledge, 130.

⁵⁵ Griffiths, Trevor (1993) 'Waving not drowning: The mainstream, 1979-88': in Griffiths, Trevor & Llewellyn-Jones, Margaret eds. (1993) *British and Irish Women Dramatists Since 1958: A Critical Handbook*: Buckingham, Open University Press, 62.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Goodman (1993) *op.cit.*, 128.

radical feminists more widely palatable than that of socialist feminists; where the latter seek to challenge entrenched attitudes towards gender (as well as towards class), the former appear to view these as unchangeable and hence only individual women, rather than women as a social group, may be able to gain a measure of power, and then only by unorthodox means.⁵⁷

As noted previously, *Neaptide* was first performed at the National Theatre, clearly a mainstream venue. Highly unusual as it was in the 1980s - and indeed still is - for a lesbian feminist play to be produced in such a context, Wandor's argument outlined above implies that there are features of the work which make it ultimately less than challenging to the dominant ideology. However, Lizbeth Goodman offers a counter-argument. Goodman suggests that for the majority of the National's audience the production would have been raising a marginal, if not 'invisible' issue in simply introducing the theme of lesbian mothers' custody rights, and that the importance of this should not be underestimated; in other words, within this relatively conservative context the play still constitutes a challenge. Perhaps the different positions adopted here by Wandor and Goodman illustrate a conflict of feminist interests, in the terms identified by Felski: how are feminist ideas to be disseminated through society as a whole without diluting them to the point of compromise, in order that they become palatable to those for whom they are not 'naturally' to their taste?

I will conclude by revisiting what it is that I believe *Neaptide* seeks to achieve. Primarily, it would seem that the play aims to combat prejudice against lesbians by deconstructing negative stereotypes and by exploring common ground between gay and straight women; the emphasis on the love between mothers and daughters - channelled through the Demeter-Persephone myth - assists these aims, as affinities with, rather than divergences from, heterosexual experience are foregrounded. If these aims are not radical, they might at least be achievable. Within this mainstream theatre context the representation of positive images and an expression of love overcoming interpersonal prejudices may be all that is immediately possible, but might also constitute a step towards a deeper understanding of sexual difference. Daniels' own views on the limits

⁵⁷ Quoted in Griffiths & Llewellyn-Jones eds. (1993) *op.cit.*, 62.
(66)

of theatre's political power would seem to support this reading:

I am a little bit too old to think that the theatre can change lives but I do think it can change or at least affect the way we think, or make us rethink. A play can certainly challenge assumptions, and encourage audiences to examine the way they think or feel about certain issues, and indeed about other people.⁵⁸

Daniels' use of myth within *Neaptide* is one of the chief means by which she encourages her audience to rethink these various "assumptions". A myth which expresses so strongly a mother's grief over the loss of her daughter is reinvented to explore the forms that loss might take within contemporary society, to show separation in mental as well as physical terms; the mother's readiness to 'stop the world' in order to recover her daughter becomes instead a decision to remove her altogether from the space where a system's prejudices place her under threat; lastly, the solution which asserts a balance of female with male, life with death, is rejected in favour of an all-female alternative which implies lesbian relations whilst overtly expressing non-sexual love between women as a force for good in an imperfect world.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Goodman, Lizbeth ed. (1996) *Feminist Stages: Interviews With Women in Contemporary British Theatre*: Amsterdam, Harwood Academic Publishers, 101-2.

Chapter III Disruptions

We cannot rephrase it for you. If we could, why would we trouble to show you the myth?¹

In this chapter I consider three playtexts written over a time-span of twenty years, all first produced in Britain and all inspired by classical mythology. These plays work with myths centred on acts of violence - and especially, female violence - and re-vision them for contemporary times, asking audiences to confront certain instances of 'barbaric' behaviour as expressions of revolt (whether conscious or unconscious) against an unjust system. As critical interventions from the feminist counter-public sphere, the plays represent enquiries into social construction which begin by foregrounding the dangers of constraining gender roles, but which extend to an examination of the implications of repressive structures for society as a whole. This is a feminist perspective which demands that we reevaluate 'unsocial' behaviour, ceasing to deny, suppress, or otherwise regard it as something which should have no place in our civilised world; instead, it is argued, we must read it as a sign that there is violence within the system itself. In these re-visionings, these playwrights thus employ myth as a means both of addressing urgent social questions, and of exploring imagined alternatives to the state of oppression which, for many of the characters, is their daily reality. These two uses of myth are closely intertwined, with the same end in view: for a feminist analysis to reveal the cracks within the system, and, through a process of theatrical re-visioning, to suggest ways in which the system itself might genuinely be healed.

The first two texts I examine are Maureen Duffy's *Rites*² and Caryl Churchill and David Lan's *A Mouthful of Birds*³. These plays offer contrasting re-visionings of the

¹ Wertenbaker, Timberlake (1989) *The Love of the Nightingale*: London, Faber & Faber, 19. All page references are from this edition and are indicated in the text by the abbreviation LON.

² Duffy, Maureen (1969) *Rites*: in Wandor, Michelene ed. (1989) *Plays by Women: Volume Two*: London, Methuen. All page references are from this edition and are indicated in the text by the abbreviation R.

³ Churchill, Caryl & Lan, David (1986) *A Mouthful of Birds*: London, Methuen (in association with Joint Stock Theatre Group). All page references are from this edition and will be indicated in the text by the abbreviation MOB.

myth of the Bacchae, and are both inspired by Euripides' drama from c.407BCE. Churchill and Lan's piece was first presented in 1986, seventeen years after Duffy's; thus although the texts do examine similar questions, for example about the relationship between gender and violence, or the extent to which psychological possession can be interpreted as a political gesture, it is no surprise that we can also perceive marked differences between them both ideologically and aesthetically.

Written in 1969, *Rites* can usefully be examined within the wider context of the emerging women's movement. The play expresses vividly an antagonism between men and women - or, more accurately, a growing resentment on the part of women at their treatment within a patriarchal society. However, this resentment is expressed not through a clearly articulated position of resistance but through the representation of female violence and rage. *Rites* is a very black farce; it seems to illustrate the 'battle of the sexes', but does so in a way which ridicules rigid oppositions and too-easy sloganism. The Bacchae myth provides Duffy with themes which can be given a contemporary slant: the consequences of restrictions on female behaviour, the implications of gender separatism. *Rites* can thus be seen to explore and comment on a range of issues of very contemporary concern, most particularly in relation to the social position of women. On the other hand the play is not polemic, and again, its basis in myth is significant here. The dream or nightmare qualities of the Bacchae narrative are clearly an attraction for the playwright; the audience has to make what it can of the playfully fantastic scenario which unfolds and will feel cheated if their expectation is that the play - offered originally as part of a 'special season' of women's writing backed by the National Theatre - should lay down straightforward guidelines for future action.

A Mouthful of Birds is theatrically much more ambitious than *Rites*, and also presents its audience with a deeper and more layered picture of gender identity and relations. In the first place, it is full-length (whereas Duffy's is a one-act play); secondly, it is stylistically complex, incorporating several individual and ensemble dance sequences within its broad dramatic structure. The women characters of *Rites* are all white and heterosexual, although varying in age, whereas within *A Mouthful of Birds* Churchill

and Lan seek to explore the construction of identity in wider terms. However, here, as in Duffy's play, there is a constant shifting between a reflection of a recognisably contemporary society - although presented in a more fragmented form than in *Rites* - and a flight from it into a fantastic realm where anything is possible. Again, myth is offered both as a way into an examination of pressing social questions, and as a departure from that sphere which is also frequently experienced as emotionally and spiritually deadening.

The third play considered within the chapter is Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*, written two years after *A Mouthful of Birds* in 1988. As a re-visioning of myth, Wertenbaker's play stands apart from the other two considered here in that it has its base in a myth which is relatively unfamiliar and of which we have no extant version in Greek drama. The story of Philomele and Procne offers a very different route into the theme of gender and violence, specifically one whereby a murder by women is carried out not in a moment of madness or loss of control, but as a premeditated response to male oppression. This particular myth is an appropriate choice for a playwright such as Wertenbaker who explicitly requires an audience to evaluate her characters' actions both ethically and in terms of political efficacy. Of the three plays included here, *The Love of the Nightingale* is, I believe, the most unambiguous in its sense of social commitment. Further, Wertenbaker draws her audience's attention to the wider discourses of myth, both through the reflections of her male and female chorus and in the incorporation within the play of elements from both Euripides' *Hippolytus* and, again, the story of the Bacchae. Through this interweaving of myths, and through the strategies of metatheatricality employed by the playwright, we are urged to reflect not only on the stories told, but on the operation of myth in its widest sense within our own lives.

All three plays contain an important choric element. The narrative of the Bacchae is clearly one which examines group behaviour, even though Euripides' emphasis is largely on the opposition of the values represented by Pentheus, on the one hand, and Dionysos, on the other. Whilst the voice of the public does not seem central to the myth of Philomele and Procne, there is a significant choric presence in *Hippolytus* which

Wertenbaker exploits in order to develop a commentary on the whole action of her play. *The Love of the Nightingale* asks how far individuals may abdicate personal responsibility, accepting the shelter and relative anonymity provided by the group; the play questions the innocence of those who 'follow orders', unwilling to challenge a leadership even when it becomes a tyranny.

This issue of the relationship between the individual and the collective must be an important theme for virtually any social movement, and feminism is no exception; as Felski notes, conflict frequently arises when it is required that individual differences be suppressed, even temporarily, in the pursuit of collective goals.⁴ Of the three plays, *A Mouthful of Birds* appears the most concerned with questions of individualism, whereas *Rites* and *The Love of the Nightingale* both focus more heavily on the possibilities and the implications of collective action; of these two, Wertenbaker's play is, in my view, the more directly provocative, as it proposes an ethical alignment between chorus and audience whereby the latter are forced to reflect on their own relationship to existing social structures.

As with the work discussed in the previous chapter, here the three playwrights reinvent specific myths as a means of exploring issues of contemporary concern. However, whereas the previous plays essentially take stories and structures of myth as a pretext for social analysis, these plays by Duffy, Churchill and Lan, and Wertenbaker all reveal an attraction to the territory of myth itself. This is not merely a sphere where the fantastic becomes possible and expected, but seemingly one which invites a different mode of thought; if myth offers an alternative way of knowing to enlightenment reasoning, can it be deconstructed by purely rational means - and what place do we make for the irrational in our thought, our theatre, our lives? Clearly, the binary oppositions of rationality and irrationality have been an important focus of feminist consideration. The collective evidence of the three plays discussed here would not support the extreme position, often associated with French feminism, which associates rationality itself with the phallogocentric desire to enforce order and stability upon our

⁴ See Felski (1989) *op.cit.*, 166-67.

conceptual universe⁵ ; rather their tendency is to dismantle such oppositions, whilst nevertheless recognising the ideological weight carried by these categories, categories which are given added force when they are expressed - or disguised - through myth.

In content, all three plays dramatise violent revolt against the forces of repressive authority, although with a variety of emphases and conclusions. Given such subject-matter, it seems important to examine the question of visibility, impact and reception of these pieces, as forms of feminist intervention within a public sphere which privileges patriarchal values. *Rites*, *A Mouthful of Birds* and *The Love of the Nightingale* were all first produced within a mainstream theatre context: at London's Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre, at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, and at Stratford's The Other Place, respectively. Given that the staging of plays by women at major venues was scarcely more common in 1988 than in 1969, the very fact of their production is worthy of note, constituting a potential challenge to the 'natural' order.⁶ *Rites* was written, as I have indicated, for a brief season of women's work supported by the National Theatre. The idea for the season itself came from a growing realisation on the theatre's part that, in practice, it was not as representative of 'the nation' as it might be. The creation of special programmes such as this one can be perceived, however, as both encouraging and problematic. It is encouraging that institutions of the dominant culture should seek to expand their horizons of operation; it is problematic if this expansion serves in reality as a self-contained, carnivalesque escape from the real business of theatre repertory, a short-lived departure from the *status quo*. It is relevant, here, that the season as a whole was titled *Ladies' Night*, a label which implies precisely this sense of a special favour

⁵ The concept of 'phallogocentrism' was proposed by Jacques Derrida, as a means of describing the inseparability of phallogocentrism (society's perception of the phallus as symbol of power) and logocentrism (a belief in the primacy of the word). As I discuss elsewhere in the thesis - and particularly in Chapter Five - these ideas have influenced feminist attempts to develop an alternative *écriture féminine*. For a brief summary of and commentary upon this argument elsewhere, see Moi, Toril (1991) *Sexual/Textual Politics*: London, Routledge, 159-60.

⁶ The small percentage of women's plays staged at major venues can be paralleled with the extent of recognition accorded to women within the British theatre industry as a whole at that time. In support of this observation, Mary Remnant quotes a survey carried out in 1987 by the Women's Playhouse Trust: "The research shows that for every level of appointment that might be expected to have a significant impact on theatre policy, where women hold such posts, they are disadvantaged financially, and therefore artistically, compared with men in the same posts. In most posts, women are more likely than men with the same job title to be working with small theatre companies with low levels of funding, with small-scale touring theatre companies without a permanent building base, or in theatres with small auditoria [...]." Remnant, Mary ed. (1988) *Plays by Women: Vol.7*: London, Methuen, 7.

conferred by those in authority, as opposed to a commitment towards a permanent inclusion. [R: 26]⁷

As a way of exploring this 'making space' for women's work within the wider public sphere, the metaphor of carnival is, I think, worth pursuing. Anthony Gash⁸ draws attention to the important concept of *reversal* associated with carnival, but notes two ways in which this might serve a conservative rather than a liberating function:

The first is logical: reversals are only intelligible in terms of a normative system of rules, oppositions and subordinations. The ritual enactment of 'opposites' therefore provides a mirror or map of the 'true' order of things. The second is psychological: to allow inferiors to abuse or command their superiors is an attempt to exorcise aggressive impulses which might otherwise jeopardise the smooth running of a hierarchical society.⁸

It is interesting to review *Rites* in the light of these observations. The production was framed as a conscious - and temporary - departure from the norm, part of a celebratory 'festival' of women's writing. Following the festival, has anything changed? A connection, although not an absolute parallel, can of course be made with the play's content. Here, the special space designated for women to congregate is the ladies' lavatory; here, the possibilities of subversive behaviour are explored, although ultimately Duffy shows her female characters returning unchanged to their old routines, their rebellious impulses seemingly exorcised. (However, as I discuss later in the chapter, I do not interpret the play's conclusion to mean that the author herself considers female rebellion doomed to failure.) In Felski's terms, both the content and the context of *Rites* illustrate the issue of how far feminist activity can meaningfully influence wider social structures. The creation of a privileged space is one way to facilitate such activity, yet if this is contained as a 'ritual enactment of opposites', its

⁷ It is hoped that the irony of the title was at least to some degree intentional.

⁸ Gash, Anthony (1993) 'Carnival and the Poetics of Reversal': in Hilton, Julian (1993) *New Directions in the Theatre*: London, Macmillan, 88.

impact must be seriously diminished.⁹

More positively, however, there is evidence to suggest that the theatrical life of *Rites* has extended well beyond its initial season. Thanks to its publication by Methuen in 1969, and again in 1983, the play has been performed several times and in many different countries and languages. Duffy also notes that it has proved popular as a student production, first because its relationship to classical drama gives added academic interest (and possibly status), and second because its unusually large female cast fairly reflects the high proportion of women amongst students of drama. (R: 26) In a variety of ways, then, *Rites* constitutes a positive, early feminist intervention within a male-dominated theatrical arena (despite the challenges I have raised regarding context of production).

By contrast with *Rites*, Churchill and Lan's *A Mouthful of Birds* was not presented within any privileging frame - but some of the many criticisms the production received suggest that possibly it should have been. One reviewer challenged the legitimacy of its main stage placing at Birmingham Repertory Theatre, considering the piece "patently studio material".¹⁰ In a similar vein, the *Guardian* found it

one of those perversely impenetrable and self-indulgent exercises in baffling obscurity which are so deeply meaningful to the company that they forget the need to engage and communicate with their audience.¹¹

Such comments represent the production as occurring out of place, acceptable within the studio or rehearsal room, but certainly unworthy of the central public auditorium.

Staging it there, imply the critics, constitutes an unlicensed disorder, a contrast to the

⁹ I am very aware that the question of carnival, and in particular, its potential and limits as a form of social subversion, has been widely - and heatedly - debated. The Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1984, Bloomington, Indiana University Press) is a classic work on the subject; a useful commentary on and analysis of Bakhtin's position is provided in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986, London, Methuen). Theatre practitioners within the UK who have debated and explored the possibilities of carnivalesque performance include David Edgar, John McGrath and John Fox of Welfare State International. My intention here is to use carnival as a metaphor for the 'reversal' implied by a festival of women's writing, rather than to suggest that *Rites* (or *A Mouthful of Birds*, or *The Love of the Nightingale*) can be seen as carnivalesque performance in itself.

¹⁰ Collected as 'A Mouthful of Words: in *Art Report* (November 1986), Birmingham Repertory Theatre.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

permitted topsyturvydom of carnival to which I have referred. Again, these observations on production context can be provocatively related back to content. In *The Bacchae*, the social order is overturned when the women abandon their ‘proper sphere’ of the domestic; in *A Mouthful of Birds*, men as well as women reject approved gender roles and experience alternatives which range from the exhilarating to the horrifying.

It is worth looking further, however, at the grounds on which *A Mouthful of Birds* was criticised. The piece was deemed “incoherent” and “fragmented” by several reviewers, ultimately “a ridiculous spectacle”.¹² Might a coherent, linear piece have fared better? A piece organised, perhaps, along Aristotelian lines? Possibly the critics of *A Mouthful of Birds* were looking for the causal structure, ultimate resolution and unifying authoritative perspective of Greek tragedy. What they received instead was something closer to the carnivalesque: ‘illogical’ events, a shift from the linear towards simultaneity and juxtaposition, and a multiplicity of authorial voices which co-exist rather than cohere.¹³

In its content, performance style and production context, *A Mouthful of Birds* represented a challenge to the perceived natural order, and one which, as I have indicated, was not greeted with much favour.¹⁴ It has been staged since, although not, so far as I am aware, within the professional theatre. I co-directed the play myself in 1992, in an intimate, black-box studio space; the university audience (primarily students and academics in drama and gender studies) responded supportively and positively to the work. These are conditions of production very different from those of the original event, an offering of work within a broadly sympathetic community of interest rather than to a mainstream audience who rejected it, in many cases, for failing to meet a particular set of expectations. In my discussion later in the chapter I focus on

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ These criticisms of *A Mouthful of Birds* may be read in terms of a privileging of the ‘masculine’ (that which is coherent, linear and rational), over the ‘feminine’ (that which is incoherent, fragmented and irrational). I consider this gendering of values and aesthetics further, later in the thesis, in my discussion of *écriture féminine*; see Chapter Five.

¹⁴ Not all the reviews of *A Mouthful of Birds* were negative. Mary Cutler described it as “difficult in the way good poetry can be, reverberating, taking you to places in your mind or imagination you haven’t visited before, moving, totally engrossing, a created world on stage, dreams made real”. In Birmingham Repertory Theatre (1986) *op.cit.*.

the original Joint Stock production, but also make brief reference to my own staging of the play.

The case of Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* is different again. The production - opening at The Other Place¹⁵ and then transferring to the Barbican - was more favourably received than *A Mouthful of Birds*, but the author was still criticised for her ambition. Nicholas de Jongh's review for the *Guardian* begins:

Some grave theatrical business is being transacted. Timberlake Wertenbaker is trying on the mantle of the classic Greek tragedian. It does not fit.¹⁶

So, Wertenbaker has dressed herself in the robes of the masters, apparently making herself a spectacle in the process. The observation that some playwrights (here, as it happens, female) fail to reach the level of those whose work they seek to emulate (here, as it happens male) is not uncommon. I do find de Jongh's words remarkable, however, given that Wertenbaker *knows* that the "mantle" does not fit; indeed, this is an apt metaphor for her re-visionary project, which deliberately challenges the conventions of classical Greek theatre on several points.

It is not the case, however, that women theatre makers in general are being judged unable to rise to the level demanded by Greek tragedy. In a detailed analysis of the critical reception of Wertenbaker's plays, Susan Carlson draws attention to the reviews of *Electra* (directed by Deborah Warner), presented by the RSC at the Pit shortly after *The Love of the Nightingale* had opened in Stratford. *Electra* was termed "thrilling", "searing" and "electrifying", its design - featuring a river of blood which split the stage - highly admired, and the piece as a whole acclaimed for its presentation of "naked emotional violence" and "moral ambiguity". This was a production of Greek drama which met with far more general favour than the semi-parodic *The Love of the Nightingale*. In sharp contrast with Warner's explosive treatment of *Electra*, Wertenbaker's theatrical interweaving of myths was experienced by some as cool and detached, overly didactic. *The Love of the Nightingale* presents an examination of

¹⁵ The Other Place is a fairly high status venue within the context of mainstream subsidised theatre, but it's nevertheless notable that again the production context is not the principal space, but is 'other'.

¹⁶ de Jongh, Nicholas (1989) Review of *The Love of the Nightingale* at the Pit, *The Guardian*, 23.8.89.

violence, not a revelling in it. The play's ending resists closure, yet the piece as a whole nevertheless asserts a strong ethical stance, as opposed to the praised "moral ambiguity" of *Electra*.¹⁷ As with *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds*, *The Love of the Nightingale* deals with social reversal; as a feminist intervention within the public sphere, the piece is, unsurprisingly, criticised for failing to conform to conventional social, and theatrical, values.

Nothing sacred: Maureen Duffy's *Rites*

Rites was first presented by the National Theatre Company in February 1969 as part of an "experimental programme"¹⁸, and was directed by Joan Plowright. In a brief essay accompanying the published playtext Duffy explains that this programme or season of work was initiated following a meeting of several actors, actresses, directors and writers prominent within the contemporary British theatre which sought to address the inequality of opportunity for women in all aspects of the profession.¹⁹ (R: 26) The restrictions facing women as makers and players of theatre were acknowledged and so a privileged space was carved out; the strategy adopted was thus explicitly one of positive discrimination, an attempt to challenge the values of the dominant cultural and ideological spheres. Whilst the project clearly could not hope to provide opportunities for all the women who might have been seeking recognition within theatre at that point, the intention was that it should inspire others, and would express an impulse towards permanent theatrical reform. Duffy's essay implies that the fact of women's inclusion as playwrights was perhaps more important to this group of practitioners than a desire to see any particular kind of work produced. She describes the group as "very brave" in

¹⁷ Carlson also suggests that the different representation of women in the two plays may be relevant to this question of reception. In *Electra*, "women, while prominent and strong, *are* stereotyped [...]. The play, after all, pits a daughter against her mother - the typing even allowing one reviewer to reach the disturbing conclusion that 'there is always something self-immolating about the greatest actresses' (Coveney)." Carlson, Susan (1993) 'Issues of Identity, Nationality, and Performance: the Reception of Two Plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker': in *New Theatre Quarterly* Vol.9 No.35, 272.

¹⁸ Keyssar, Helene (1984) *Feminist Theatre*: London, Macmillan, 117.

¹⁹ As this period saw the gradual emergence in Britain (as well as elsewhere) of the women's movement, this awareness and attempt to address questions of gender inequality can be regarded as part of the wider concerns of the latent 'feminist public sphere'.

accepting her own contribution of *Rites*, “a version of *The Bacchae* set in a ladies’ public lavatory”; it was one thing for the National to support women’s involvement, but perhaps another to accept a play which seemingly appropriated/perverted a classic text and included language delivered by women which was thought - in that period and context - to be “very outspoken”. (R: 26)²⁰

Rites is a one-act play with twelve female roles. As stated above, in its theme the play draws inspiration from Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, itself based in classical mythology. Euripides’ play presents its audience with a collision of values, between Dionysos, god of wine and sensuality, and Pentheus, ruler of the city of Thebes and representative of ancient Greek patriarchy. Under the influence of the god, all the women of the city abandon their duties within the private sphere of the home and depart for the hills, to take part in collective orgiastic rites of worship. Infuriated by this threat to his authority, Pentheus attempts unsuccessfully to capture Dionysos. Eventually the king admits his desire to see the women’s rites, and, under the hypnotic influence of the god, allows himself to be disguised as a bacchante in order to watch them without being suspected. However, Dionysos’ punishment of the city - for failing to honour himself and his mother Semele before him - quickly follows; in a state of delirium Pentheus’ own mother Agave physically tears him apart, convinced that she is slaying a wild beast. When the madness finally clears, Agave is grieved and appalled by her actions and the city as a whole is cast into mourning.²¹

The Bacchae was an inspiration rather than a model for *Rites*, and Duffy does not attempt to make her play conform to it. In a clear departure from Euripides, she shifts emphasis entirely away from Pentheus and Dionysos and places it instead on Agave

²⁰ It’s worth noting however, that *Rites*, along with the other pieces included in the programme, was not in fact initially performed at the Old Vic - then the National’s base - but at the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre which the National, Duffy explains “was using as a kind of studio theatre” (R: 26); these women’s work was therefore still not being allowed into the National’s ‘main space’.

²¹ Euripides (c.411 BCE) *The Bacchae*: in Euripides, trans. Hadas & McLean (1981) *op.cit.*, 281-312. Euripides’ version emphasises aspects of the story (such as Pentheus’ disguise) which do not always appear in tellings of the myth. Drawing off Theocritus and Ovid, Robert Graves’ account reads: “Pentheus, King of Thebes, disliking Dionysus’s dissolute appearance, arrested him, together with all his Maenads, but went mad and, instead of shackling Dionysus, shackled a bull. The Maenads escaped again, and went raging out upon the mountains, where they tore calves in pieces. Pentheus attempted to stop them; but, inflamed by wine and religious ecstasy, they rent him limb from limb. His mother Agave led the riot, and it was she who wrenched off his head.” Graves (1978a) *op.cit.*, 105.

and the bacchantes.²² However, *Rites*' basis in myth remains implicit rather than explicit; *The Bacchae* dissolves into the play's contemporary action and its characters are refigured for a new context: for example, Agave has become Ada, superintendent of the ladies' public lavatory. A knowledge of the Greek play or of the myth is thus not necessary for an understanding of *Rites*, although, as Duffy states, an audience would find "pleasure in knowing, in adding another layer". (R: 27)

A central theme of Euripides' play is curiosity, primarily that of Pentheus: what is the nature of these rituals, what do the women do when they are alone? Concepts of voyeurism are clearly still of primary importance for Duffy, marked by her decision to set the action of *Rites* within the context of the women's lavatory. This is territory which is intimately female and at the same time immediately de-glamourising. Such a setting contrasts vividly with that used by Euripides to open *The Bacchae*, where "the scene represents the front of the royal palace at Thebes".²³ Euripides' formal scene-setting is typical of Greek tragedy, which centres on the actions of the nobility, whilst emphasising their significance for the community as a whole. Duffy's setting thus represents a deliberate down-grading of status, perhaps a reflection of women's inferior social position.²⁴ In exposing the private world of the women's lavatory to the general theatre audience, Duffy plays on the theme of male curiosity about a female realm (although men and women spectators would have a different perspective on what is shown), inverts expectations about an appropriate setting for 'Greek tragedy', and blurs distinctions between private and public spheres.

Within this context of the lavatory, the 'rites' which the audience are permitted to witness become those of washing, hair brushing and putting on make-up. Whilst these acts are clearly habitual for the women, they require extreme concentration and great significance is invested in them:

²² The shifting of perspective from a male protagonist to that of a 'lesser' female character, or to a female chorus, is one recurrent strategy within feminist re-visioning of myth.

²³ Euripides (1981), trans. Hadas & McLean, *op.cit.*, 281.

²⁴ Of *Rites*' setting, Winkler states: "I like to think of the lavatory as being situated underground, although Duffy does not specify this"; clearly to be 'underground' has revolutionary connotations, and while this is an attractive idea, it's perhaps debatable how far it is appropriate. Winkler, Elizabeth Hale (1993) 'Three recent versions of *The Bacchae*': in Redmond, James ed. (1993) *Themes in Drama No.15: 'Madness in Drama'*: Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 221.

ADA: Now look what you've done. I've stuck me pencil in me eye. I've told you before. Don't excite me when it comes to the eyes. Very delicate work the eyes. You can't do nothing without them and you've made the left one run. (R: 13)

As the play proceeds, a series of women of different ages and backgrounds enter the lavatory. Through their conversations and actions it becomes clear that the lives of all of them are in some way dominated by men, and as complaints are shared, their collective frustration grows. Finally, when an apparently male figure enters the sanctum of the women's lavatory, all restraint is abandoned and they kill the intruder in a frenzy of rage. However, they discover - in an inversion of *The Bacchae* - that the victim was in fact a woman: they have killed one of their own. Whilst each is prepared to acknowledge her responsibility, there is to be no atonement; the evidence is erased by throwing the body into the incinerator, and the women return to their 'ordinary' lives.

A crucial transformation Duffy makes in her re-visioning is the removal of Dionysos as an influential force. Whilst on one level the women in *The Bacchae* can be read as powerful - albeit temporarily - their rebellion against the patriarchal authority represented by Pentheus is problematic in feminist terms as they are under the influence of the god and hence 'not in their right minds'. On this point Allison Hersh argues persuasively that because the women are possessed as part of Dionysos' scheme for vengeance, "any act of revolt or resistance undertaken by the Bacchae is automatically qualified and dismissible".²⁵ By contrast, the violence which escalates in *Rites* does not result from the wrath of a god, but is a response to the frustration and repression of the women's everyday lives. Duffy does allow Dionysos a limited presence, however. Two women enter with "*a lifesize toddler boy doll*" which, echoing the god's androgynous qualities²⁶, "[l]ooks more like a girl" but, as the pensioner Nellie comments, "[h]alf the time you can't tell the difference these days". (R: 20) Because it is young and because it is male the boy/doll receives considerable attention, not all of it

²⁵ The problem Hersh raises is not that the women are acting under *male* influence - and Dionysos' maleness can itself be questioned (see below) - but that they are not acting of their own free will. Hersh, Allison (1992) ' "How Sweet the Kill": Orgiastic Female Violence in Contemporary Re-visions of Euripides' *The Bacchae*': in *Modern Drama*, No.35 (1992), 411-12.

²⁶ In relation to the question of Dionysos' gender, anthropologist Barbara Smith states that the god "was usually depicted as effeminate, bisexual or homosexual [...]. His iconography shows a beautiful young man, bearded but not patriarchal". Larrington ed. (1992) *op.cit.*, 67.

admiring. In a sequence which plays with ideas both of the 'worship of images' and of little girls with their dolls, the women stand it on a chair and undress it. The sight of its male genitals is a source of both awe and bitterness:

ADA: Looks so harmless all quiet there. A pity they ever have to grow up.

Snaps and snails and puppy dogs' tails.

DOT: Cause all the trouble in the world they do. (R: 21)

The women regard the child's penis as the phallus, symbol of patriarchal oppression. Ada suggests castration as a practical remedy - "It'd be so easy, and then nobody'd know the difference" (R: 21) - a blurring of the symbolic and the actual which prefigures the play's violent climax when the women respond furiously to what they misinterpret as an invasion by the enemy.

Of her choice to represent Dionysos through a doll, Duffy states:

I would not have used a real child [...] if I could have had one. A doll is at once more terrifying, more enigmatic and more appropriate, artistically to the dream idiom [...]." (R: 27)

Indeed, much of the power of *Rites* comes from the tension the play maintains between reality and unreality. Duffy claims that her "ladies' public lavatory is as real as in a vivid dream" and this seems an apt description. (R: 27) The physical set is full of detail; the lavatories are not 'signed' by a row of doors but are elaborately erected in front of us at the start of the performance by a procession of workmen and we are made to see every element, from the perfume spray to the notice about VD clinics. Whilst the attention to detail appears to signal a level of authenticity, the foregrounding of the set's construction challenges any notion of illusionism. Furthermore, the manner of construction itself heightens the sense of unreality, as it is "very stately" and the completion of each stage of the building is followed by an exchange of bows between workmen and foreman. (R: 13) In examining this opening sequence of the play, several feminist critics have rightly drawn attention to the fact that the women's 'world' is thus revealed as patriarchally constructed; this is no utopian separatist community that we are about to see, but a rigidly defined space marked out for 'ladies' within a male-

dominated society.²⁷ Nevertheless, what is missing from this analysis is a sense of Duffy's humour; the men who build the lavatories behave as if they were privileged to participate in the construction of a temple (with the toilet as 'the throne'?). Once the men have left the space, any reverence is quickly undermined by the first words and actions of the women; Ada makes up her face with "deliberate vulgarity" and Meg comments satirically:

Number Three's awash again. Like the Sea of Galilee. Anyone who goes in there'll have to be good at walking on the water. (R: 13)

The play's opening thus establishes a tone of gentle mockery which persists throughout and draws attention, in particular, to the theme of lack of communication and real understanding between the sexes.

As *Rites* progresses, its dreamlike qualities become intensified. One way this is achieved is through a deliberate inconsistency in the presentation of character. Ada and Meg, who manage the lavatory, are shown in more-or-less realistic detail. The audience sees Ada 'make herself up' in every sense; while she paints her face, the snatches of conversation that pass between her and Meg communicate clearly her perception of the image a woman needs to construct if she is to 'win' within a patriarchal society:

ADA: (*returning to the mirror*) [T]he goods are all the same when they get the wrapping off. You've got to make them pay for the wrapping off. It's the first law of finance.

MEG: You're so clever Ada. I do admire you. You've got it all thought out.

ADA: You have to live. Know your market, it says. [...] It's all on the back pages of the paper, just before the sport, if you know where to look. They think we don't read that far. (R: 14)

Ada's strategy is not one of rebellion but rather of 'beating the system'. In a society where women are objectified, she strives to make herself as costly as possible. Her making-up process expresses both her dependence on men and, simultaneously, her contempt for their gullibility. Ada adopts the language of capitalism as she takes stock of her own position and that of other women; her response to the office girl Norma's criticism that she is "mercenary" is to tell her she's a fool: "Don't you think he'll study

²⁷ See for example Hersh (1992) *op.cit.*, 419; Wandor, Michelene (1987) *Look Back in Gender*. London, Methuen, 98; Winkler (1993) *op.cit.*, 221-2.

the assets before he makes a takeover bid?" (R: 16) In this sexual and economic battleground, where men appear to have all the advantages, Ada's make-up becomes war paint. She is acutely aware, however, that this is surface glitter she is applying; when Nellie later complains about the "flimsy" cubicle doors through which "everyone can hear everything", Ada retorts: "They're cheaper than bricks and mortar and we're all made the same."²⁸ (R: 19)

While Ada's assistant Meg appears to be a willing disciple for the former's teaching, the other women characters are not so ready to be convinced. The three office girls are represented primarily as caricatures, emphasised by the choric style of their first entrance:

Enter three OFFICE GIRLS quickly, clattering and chattering.
FIRST OFFICE GIRL: He never!
SECOND OFFICE GIRL (NORMA): God's truth and cross me heart.
THIRD OFFICE GIRL: What, in the pictures?
NORMA: Right in the front row. I didn't know where to look.
FIRST OFFICE GIRL: You don't have to look.
They all burst into screams of laughter, rush into cubicles and bang the doors.
(R: 14)

This enjoyment of the bawdy that is our first impression of the three girls is quickly contradicted as they emerge from the cubicles primly shocked by the 'disgusting' graffiti on the walls. All three assume a virginal innocence: "No decent woman'd write things like that. You must have had a bloke in here" (R: 15); they continue with a litany of 'filth' - blue films, French letters, house of correction - and conclude in unison:

ALL THREE (*staccato*): Only men, only men, only men do that. (R: 15)

The girls' sexual puritanism reveals a perception of man that is as restrictive and stereotypical as any male-defined image of woman, and equally as damaging.²⁹ In their version of the world, sex and aggression are pushed into a dark, seamy and exclusively

²⁸ Ada's comment is ironic in retrospect, as we are later shown that the women are deceived into taking surface appearances as indicators of biological difference; it takes a physical examination to determine that the murder victim was in fact female. (R: 24)

²⁹ The women's imagined picture of men's 'otherness' is comically intensified by the elderly widow Dot's fearful description, a few pages later, of the men's toilets she once went into, seemingly a savage place with "a long trough, like for animals to drink from" and "a terrible rushing noise". (R: 19)

male domain; as such they acquire an ever stronger and 'male-only' power.³⁰ If this image of depravity is the girls' myth of man, the myth of woman they subscribe to is similarly limited and, it is implied, one they have been 'sold': "I fancy a day by the sea, all waves and wind tossed hair like the adverts." (R: 15) Through the girls' insistence on this romantic version of femininity, and their assignment of all violence, aggression and perversity to the masculine, Duffy swiftly establishes a precarious opposition of the sexes which the audience will surely expect to see challenged.

Nellie and Dot, two elderly widows, are similarly presented as 'types'. They enter walking in step, "*respectably and identically hatted and coated*", and apparently in the middle of a conversation about their husbands: "I cleaned his shoes for him every day of our life". (R: 16) Despite the office girls' attempts to dismiss Nellie's and Dot's wifely subservience as belonging to another generation, it becomes increasingly clear to the audience as the conversations continue that all the women are connected in their shared experience of gender-based oppression, and that this is the mediating factor which unites the characters beyond their individual differences. The characters themselves are slow to recognise this, however, and it takes Ada to make their interrelatedness explicit. She tells the office girls:

I'll tell you about your kind of love: a few moments' pleasure then a lifetime kidding yourselves. Caught, bound, even if you don't know it. Or a lifetime looking, like Meg, and wailing what you've missed. Years of ministering to a stranger like them - (*She indicates NELLIE and DOT*) - or making heroes of your children only to see them stride off and leave you. (*To the WOMAN with the doll.*) (R: 21)

As Ada's analysis reveals, the lavatory in *Rites* can on one level be read as a representation of the feminist (or perhaps, pre-feminist) counter-public sphere. Duffy presents us with an exclusively female environment - albeit male-constructed - which provides its occupants with a discursive as well as a literal space. Here, major cultural

³⁰ In her recent study of feminism's impact on the US university campus, Katie Roiphe argues that whilst initially the women's movement worked to further women's sexual liberation, now feminism itself can be seen to be advocating a 'new puritanism' of sexual behaviour; Roiphe is strongly critical of Princeton's definition of sexual harassment, for instance, which includes "leering and ogling, whistling, sexual innuendo, and other suggestive or offensive or derogatory comments, humour and jokes about sex", an all-inclusiveness which, she argues, "forces women into old roles." Roiphe's comments, almost three decades after *Rites* was first produced, show that such debates about women's own perceptions of femininity still have considerable currency. Roiphe, Katie (1994) *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism*: London, Hamish Hamilton, 100.

differences - age, class - are temporarily suspended in the interests of foregrounding the common factor of gender.³¹

The sudden discovery that the hitherto silent occupant of 'number two' has cut her wrists brings an abrupt shift in mood. The other women struggle to get "the GIRL" out of the cubicle and, appropriately enough, use sanitary towels as bandages to staunch the flow of blood. She is too weak or too miserable to do more than say one word - "Desmond!" - but this is taken by the others as evidence enough that, yet again, men have been the cause of female suffering:

ADA: Another bleeding man!

FIRST OFFICE GIRL: I'm shivered if I'd top meself for someone called Desmond.

GIRL: Desmond!

DOT: What did he do to you dear?

The GIRL cries incoherently. (R: 23)

The women's response to the injured girl's distress is a collective tirade on the evils of men.³² All these 'supporting women' - mothers, wives, secretaries - find a sudden vent for their previously suppressed rage, building to a chant in which all join: "We don't need them. Don't need them." (R: 23) This moment of celebration is short-lived. When the homeless old woman emerges nervously from cubicle number one where she has been for the duration of the action, Ada immediately identifies her as a target. The contagion of violence quickly spreads and the women encircle 'Old Mother Brown' and begin to chant a children's song - or a parody of one - which rises until it reaches "a frenzy of menace". (R: 24) Suddenly their attention is diverted by the appearance of a new victim, a figure masculine in appearance who emerges from number seven. Again, Ada acts as ringleader:

ADA: Look a bloody man. In here. Spying on us. (*They stop and all turn panting towards the FIGURE which tries to back away.*) He's trying to run for it. Don't let him out. (*Some of the women run behind him and*

³¹ As I will discuss, the sense of female solidarity which develops is, however, revealed to be only illusory or at least limited, as the women are quick to victimise the old homeless woman (R: 24).

³² In the version of *Rites* which I'm using, the name 'Desmond' is the only word the girl utters, and the other women make assumptions about what has happened to her on the basis of their own experience. However, it is possible that an alternative version exists; in her discussion of *Rites*, Keyssar states that the girl who cuts her wrists "survives to reveal that her suicide attempt was provoked by a man's abuse", which seems to imply greater detail and hence a more 'rational' motivation for the women's response. Keyssar (1984) *op.cit.*, 118.

edge him in.) You think you can get away with murder, that we've no place we can call our own. Coming down here to see what we get up to when we're alone. (R: 24)

In fury the women fall on the figure, with 'Old Mother Brown' joining in, grateful that she herself is no longer the object of their rage; when they finally step back the audience can see from the tattered, broken and bloody body that the victim is dead.

It is not until Norma examines the corpse and exclaims "Christ! It was a woman" that the women recognise their mistake. It seems that they have been guilty of stereotyping their own sex, with fatal consequences; their own definitions of the feminine have been too narrow. Michelene Wandor presents one persuasive reading of this moment:

The figure is clearly that of a lesbian: the violent hatred of men spills over into a hatred and a violence against lesbians (i.e. any kind of 'other' sexuality) - a display of murderous violence by the women against one of their own kind.³³

Whilst the murder seemed to express the women's shared frustration at the restrictions placed on them within a patriarchal system, the revelation that their sacrificial victim was one of their own kind demonstrates even more starkly the dangerous limitations of that system. The women reveal themselves as the true product of a society which represses, boxes, categorises. Duffy's own comments support this reading:

All reductions of people to objects, all imposition of labels and patterns to which they must conform, all segregation can only lead to destruction. (R: 27)

It is worth recalling that although the women are in error when they attack the figure they believe to be male, they are fully conscious of their actions when their violence is turned on 'Old Mother Brown' whom they know to be female. Interestingly, feminist criticism of *Rites* has paid little attention to this point.³⁴ The old woman is a target for the others because she *is* one of themselves. It is her age that they fear, with its implication of the loss of physical attractiveness, rather than her poverty; Ada, who of all the women is most conscious of her 'market value', hisses: "That's how we all end up." (R: 24) Within this 'women's space', then, there is no genuine female solidarity but rather a rigid hierarchy and a restricted membership, limitations which can be paralleled

³³ Wandor (1987) *op.cit.*, 99.

³⁴ See for example Keyssar (1984) *op.cit.*; Wandor (1987) *op. cit.*; Hersh (1992) *op. cit.*.

with those noted by Felski in her consideration of tensions between the ideal and real status of the feminist counter-public sphere.

In examining *Rites* as a re-visioning, it is illuminating to compare the climactic act of violence here with its counterpart in *The Bacchae*. A central point to make first of all is that *Rites* implicitly rejects one important convention of the classical theatre through the decision to show the women's violence onstage. This is significant in that the socially transgressive act of female violence becomes a physical actuality the audience - men and women both - must face, rather than a story we have been told. A further crucial change relates to the motivation for the killing of the Pentheus figure. In Euripides' play, Agave tears apart what she believes is a wild beast in ecstatic celebration of her own strength and power; she then discovers that it was no animal, but a man and her son: one of her own. In *Rites*, the women destroy what they believe is a man, but they later realise it was no man but a woman: one of *their* own. What therefore connects the two plays is less the motif of a 'spying man' than the theme of fatal misrecognition. Whilst the audience - of both men and women - can sympathise with the characters for their anger at their treatment at men's hands, what seems most important to recognise is the distortion of perception which accompanies it. The system of which the women are a part has driven them 'mad', to the point where they are unable to identify their true enemy. Drawing attention to the trivial conversation and empty ritual which precede the outbreak of violence in *Rites*, Winkler suggests that

Duffy's implication is that [...] modern sterility is a form of madness, the total perversion of the Maenads' divine possession.³⁵

Within the frame of the play, no judgment appears to be passed on the women for their crime. Lynda Hart comments that *Rites* punishes the women "for their separatist desires", yet there seems little evidence to support this as the 'punishment' of having killed in error seems to have had no significant effect³⁶; ironically, in the light of Ada's

³⁵ Winkler (1993) *op.cit.*, 222.

³⁶ Hart, Lynda ed. (1992) *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*: Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 10. It is possible to go beyond Hart here, in that if the murdered woman is a lesbian as Wandor suggests, she could be seen as an embodiment of a 'separatist' position; thus the other women's rejection of her might be regarded as their rejection or scapegoating of the *actuality* of separatism.

earlier remark, it is the women who “get away with murder”. (R: 24) In *The Bacchae*, Dionysos is aware that the worst revenge on the community for its failure to honour the gods is not merely to destroy their leader, but to manipulate the community into destroying Pentheus themselves. In *Rites*, the women are products of a system which has dulled their perceptions and led them to attack substitute targets while their real enemy - which is more complex than ‘men’ - remains unharmed; furthermore, they show no awareness that they might, by their actions, have weakened their own defences. In what seems a further play upon elements of Greek myth they remove the evidence by throwing the remains of the body to the wild beast - a minotaur? - that is the incinerator: “It’s hungry. Listen to it roar. We’ll feed it.” (R: 24) Despite their initial horror in realising their error, once the body is gone the matter is quickly forgotten and the women turn to business as usual. When all the visitors to the lavatories have left, Meg gets out the mop and Ada her make-up, each act signing the return to ‘normality’:

MEG: When you get your promotion you won’t leave me here, will you? You’ll let me come with you now, won’t you? (ADA goes on with her make-up. MEG sits down at the table.) What’s he like, your Friday feller? (R: 25)

The ending of *Rites* thus contrasts sharply with that of *The Bacchae*. In Euripides’ play Agave grieves over her son’s body, saying:

AGAVE: Now I shall die with none to mourn me. This is just;
For in my pride I did not recognise the god,
Nor understand the things I ought to have understood.³⁷

Unlike Agave, Ada and the other women have drawn no lesson from what has happened; they have not understood the things they ought to have understood. They reestablish their old routine, as Winkler notes “never entirely conscious of their own positions, and never articulating any vision of a different social organisation.”³⁸ We need not deduce from this, however, that through the play Duffy is making a pessimistic statement about the impossibility of an effective feminist challenge to the patriarchal system. As noted earlier, the author likens the action to a vivid dream, adding that “it need be no more real than that.” (R: 27) Throughout the action of the play

³⁷ Euripides (1972), trans. Vellacott, Philip, *The Bacchae*: Harmondsworth, Penguin, 241.

³⁸ Winkler (1993) *op.cit.*, 219.

Duffy is at pains to stress its unreality despite the superficial realism of the setting and language. The use of synchronised movements, chanting, abrupt shifts of mood and the overriding tone of black farce work together to discourage the audience from too deep an involvement and to remind us, as Winkler notes, that alternative behaviours are possible.³⁹ Wandor's reading supports the view that *Rites* is deliberately provocative:

It is a morality play in the best sense of the word, not because the women are blamed in any way, but because the play's violent and shocking outcome implicitly challenges us to question a world in which the sexes could be driven so far apart.⁴⁰

Duffy uses myth to enable her to open up questions of contemporary relevance, whilst at the same time maintaining a deliberate distance: as a vivid dream, it reflects yet distorts 'reality'. If *Rites* is understood as dream/myth, it becomes evident that we are being shown not a photographic image of our world but an impressionistic painting of it, with bold colours and stark lines. The action of *Rites* deals with basic human emotions - desire, anger, violence - and while it implies a social critique in that these emotions are explored in gendered terms, the play's tone and Duffy's own statements suggest that she is as interested in the fantastic/impossible as she is in arguing for specific practical reform. The author's notes on the subject of catharsis seem to maintain this ambiguity. Duffy's version of Aristotelian catharsis stresses its purging effect; we see drama which deals with dark, rebellious emotions and we emerge "drained, purged and purified" as a result of the vicarious experience. (R: 27) It has been argued that catharsis in art can be regarded as the 'social safety valve' of a political system, as the audience typically witness a challenge to the dominant order by the protagonist but ultimately see the reassertion of that order's values, thus purging any rebellious tendencies on the spectator's part.⁴¹ Duffy states that her play, similarly, aims to achieve catharsis. If this is taken literally it could be thought to undermine the play's political impact as it seems to imply that the audience of *Rites* are allowed to purge themselves of the women's violence rather than view it as an expression of genuine and ongoing gender tensions. However Duffy's essay, like the play itself, is playful, ironic and designed to provoke. *Rites* warns of the dangers of being too quick

³⁹ *Ibid*, 223.

⁴⁰ Wandor (1987) *op.cit.*, 8.

⁴¹ See for example Boal, Augusto (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed*: London, Pluto Press, 1-50.

to categorise, and this is a lesson that should be borne in mind when analysis of the author's purpose is attempted. The National's 'experiment' of a programme of women's theatre clearly provides Duffy with the space to play, as much as it gives her a political forum.

'I don't know what got into me':

Caryl Churchill & David Lan's *A Mouthful of Birds*

Like Duffy's *Rites*, *A Mouthful of Birds* presents a re-visioning of the myth of the Bacchae and here again it is Euripides' text which is specified as the play's source. *A Mouthful of Birds* was co-authored by Caryl Churchill and David Lan, a more-or-less collaborative approach which was echoed in the co-direction of the original Joint Stock production by Les Waters and Ian Spink (choreographer) in 1986 at Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Clearly, then, this play cannot be unproblematically incorporated within a discussion of women's theatre; to do so would be to marginalise other creative voices, and hence to adopt the kind of tactic feminism rightly criticises within the patriarchy. My decision to include the play, then, is motivated by its explicit and primary focus on questions of gender but also by my awareness that the collaborative method of creation seems to offer a significant reflection of the reevaluation of gender relations the play itself represents as necessary.

The diversity of critical readings available of *A Mouthful of Birds* can in part be understood in terms of their authors' perceptions of Caryl Churchill's location within the feminist public sphere. Jay Plum, for instance, identifies Churchill as a materialist feminist who here uses *The Bacchae* as a historical text in order to reveal the social construction of gender and advocate reform.⁴² Elin Diamond introduces the playwright in similar fashion, stressing the important formative influences of socialist debates within the women's movement and activist fringe theatre on Churchill's professional development; Diamond goes on, however, to offer a reading of *A Mouthful of Birds* which stresses aesthetic qualities she associates rather with the cultural feminist

⁴² Plum, Jay (1991) 'Re-Viewing the *Bacchae* in *A Question of Silence* and *A Mouthful of Birds*': in *Text & Presentation* (1991) No.11, 92.

theory/practice of Cixous.⁴³ Such perspectives clearly have an important bearing on how the play's re-visioning of myth, specifically, might be understood.

It is helpful at this point to consider how the myth of the Bacchae came to be chosen as the play's starting-point. Churchill states in her introduction to the text that a central motivation for writing *A Mouthful of Birds* was the desire to explore relationships between women and violence. Within a period notable for the Greenham 'peace protests' against nuclear weapons, she questions a culturally inscribed opposition of women as 'peaceful' and men as 'violent':

There is a danger of polarising men and women into what becomes again the traditional view that men are naturally more violent and so have no reason to change. (MOB: 5)

Women must not be seen, or see themselves, simply as the victims of violence, any more than they should subscribe to the myth of woman as the 'natural' homemaker and upholder of domestic harmony; such essentialisation becomes a tyranny which requires the suppression of those behaviours which threaten the stability of the idealised image. It is clearly equally problematic to discount the sociohistoric factors which have placed men in contexts where violence is legitimised and required. As Churchill states, it is

important to recognise women's capacity for violence and men's for peacefulness. There is a difference between women able to be peaceable because they wave men off to war and women who recognise their own capacity for violence but choose not to use it. (MOB: 5)

The myth of the Bacchae, in its incorporation of the elements both of violent, uncontrolled women (the bacchantes) and of 'feminised' men (expressed in Pentheus' disguising himself as a woman in order to observe the bacchantes, and in the androgynous qualities of Dionysos) thus provides a thematically appropriate starting-point. However, *A Mouthful of Birds* cannot be regarded simply as an update of Euripides' drama; rather the latter becomes, as Diamond suggests, "a source of momentum and expectation" within the play's otherwise contemporary action.⁴⁴

⁴³ Diamond, Elin (1988) '(In)Visible Bodies in Churchill's Theater': in Hart ed. (1989) *op.cit.*, 259-60.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 274.

A Mouthful of Birds and *The Bacchae* are connected by their shared themes of violence, ecstasy and possession. In their separate introductions to the published text both Churchill and Lan explore the importance of this last concept. Lan (an anthropologist as well as a playwright) notes that while in some contexts spirit possession is characterised as satanic and is thus forbidden, in others it may be a source of status and power.⁴⁵ We see a conflation of this in *The Bacchae*, where the women's possession by Dionysus inspires behaviour which constitutes a radical threatening of the social order.⁴⁶ In *A Mouthful of Birds*, however, the authors wanted to explore a wider notion of possession, viewing it as "any form of behaviour that is not entirely under one's own control", influenced by anything from love to alcohol. (MOB: 6) The idea of possession can also be extended to include *A Mouthful of Birds*' relationship both to Euripides' drama and the mythic source. Lan states that their play "which began with *The Bacchae*, is itself possessed by it" (MOB: 6) and Churchill writes of a force bursting from the past, "something not invented by us or by Euripides". (MOB: 5) It is clear, then, that this is a re-visioning which acknowledges myth as a source not merely of inspiration, but also of power which, even for the authors, may not entirely be under control.

In both *A Mouthful of Birds* and *The Bacchae*, the intrusion of the Dionysian spirit into the lives of the characters constitutes a profound disturbance which propels them, as Geraldine Cousin points out, "into a new dimension [where] the possibilities that exist [...] are non-rational, magic ones".⁴⁷ The authors' choice to use Euripides' play as a creative starting-point can be understood, then, in different ways; whilst its themes were felt to have important and specific ideological resonances within the sociopolitical context of mid-eighties Britain, it also offered a non-realist model of magical

⁴⁵ This perception is supported by other anthropologists such as Ioan Lewis, who argues that in certain parts of the world women's possession cults, although ostensibly concerned with curing disease, also serve as "thinly disguised protest movements directed against the dominant sex" and that such cults frequently include "downtrodden categories of men"; Lewis, I.M. (1978) *Ecstatic Religion*: Harmondsworth, Penguin, 31-2.

⁴⁶ Allison Hersh stresses this aspect of Euripides' drama, noting that the bacchantes have rejected the realm of domesticity in favour of what they perceive to be a liberating Dionysiac existence; they are, as the Chorus tells us, "that mob of women, who rebelled against shuttle and loom answering the urge of Dionysos". Hersh (1992) *op.cit.*, 411.

⁴⁷ Cousin, Geraldine (1989) *Churchill, the playwright*: London, Methuen, 61.

intervention which invited a dreaming space, a presentation of time “as an elastic process which can be shaped or altered”.⁴⁸

A Mouthful of Birds presents us with seven contemporary characters, defined in the text according to their social role - for example Lena (a Mother), Dan (a Vicar) and Doreen (a Secretary) - whose lives are utterly disrupted by explosive forces, here associated with the spirit of Dionysos. The influence of the god is manifest as a physical presence exerting a direct bodily effect on the seven, whereby they are represented as literally ‘possessed’. The concept of the invasion of the civilised/familiar by the wild/unknown is further echoed through the setting; the Joint Stock production presented the audience with a number of box-like rooms arranged to resemble an opened dolls’ house, yet with a tree growing fantastically out of the staircase.⁴⁹ The structure of the play is episodic, with the contemporary characters’ individual stories told through seven inter-related dramas. Interwoven with these are fragmented verbal and danced sequences exploring the characters’ needs and desires, and expressing the relationship of these to the mythic action of *The Bacchae*.

Each of these seven characters is seen to make a personal journey in the course of the play. We are first shown their apparently ordinary lives, within the frame of the home, for example, or the workplace. Cracks then start to show in the thin skin of civilisation and the appearance of normality becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. The forms these fissures initially take range from the familiar to the bizarre: Lena and her husband have ‘communication problems’, acupuncturist Yvonne struggles with depression and alcoholism, the businessman Paul finds himself falling in love with a pig and neglects both his family and his work. The lives of all are ultimately disrupted by the explosive release of fierce psychic and sexual energies, akin to the Dionysiac spirit. In each case the character is brought to a state of extremity, to what Churchill refers to as an “undefended day” (MOB: 5) in which all normal constraints are abandoned and anything

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 61.

⁴⁹ See MOB: 59 for an illustration of this image.

is possible⁵⁰ ; within the mythic parallel of *The Bacchae*, this is the moment of the women's violent murder of Pentheus. *A Mouthful of Birds* concludes with seven short monologues in which each of the characters considers their experience and where it has brought them. Lena, who killed her baby, now works as a carer for the elderly with sickness and death a part of her new routine; Yvonne continues to manipulate flesh but as a butcher; Paul has literally 'dropped out' of the rat race - drinking, waiting, hoping for a chance to reexperience the intensity of feeling he knew when he was in love. Of the seven, only Doreen - the last to speak - cannot reflect on her experience because she is still caught up in it, wrestling with it. Calm has not been restored, a fact reinforced by the final image of the play of Dionysos, dancing.

It is important to consider why it should be these individuals, rather than others, to whom Dionysos appears. The initial glimpses we are given do not present them as exceptional, yet each of these opening scenes hints at a significant vulnerability. Yvonne attempts to help her client overcome his anger, whilst her own is welling up: "I give up my lunch break..." (MOB: 21) When we encounter the character again in Act 2 it is evident that the problem is worsening as, in denial of her alcoholism, her sense of herself disappears in a tide of contradictory emotions. Marcia, a Trinidadian, represents another form of repression as she alternates between an acceptable switchboard voice to take calls for "Continental Lingerie" and her own West Indian accent in private conversation with a friend. (MOB: 19-20) This 'loss of voice' becomes more extreme, as later we see her working as a medium, unable to shake off her possession by the spirit of a white upper-class woman. This development serves as an expression of British society's refusal to tolerate her otherness, and at the same time acts as a metaphor for the internalisation of the values of the dominant cultural order. From the first moments of the play both Yvonne and Marcia can thus be seen to be splitting off or suppressing aspects of themselves in order to present a socially acceptable - and employable - facade.

⁵⁰ As Churchill notes, the actors themselves explored alternatives to their usual patterns of behaviour in the workshop process which preceded the writing of the script. "Some of us were hypnotised and taken back to previous lives, some had a night out with two hundred women watching drag acts and male strippers, most of us spent a couple of days living and sleeping in the open. Days and nights without our usual routines seemed long and full of possibilities." (MOB: 5)

It is not only the female characters who are struggling with self-image. Derek bodybuilds obsessively to cultivate the outward appearance of 'manliness', in an attempt to compensate for his failure to find work. Despite his avowed rejection of his father's equation of productivity with masculinity - "He thought he wasn't a man without a job" - it is evident that his sense of his own identity is precarious. (MOB: 20)⁵¹

For the vicar, Dan, the situation is rather different. His first scene shows him struggling to meet the diverse demands of his profession by providing socially acceptable answers to every question, whether it be mundane, political or spiritual. Meanwhile, his mind is preoccupied with thoughts - not to be shared with "the bishop" - of the relationships between gender and spiritual power. (MOB: 22)

As the characters are gradually revealed to us it becomes clear that all seven are in different ways socially marginalised, or otherwise in positions of extremity; as such they are, as Churchill's introduction states, "open to possession". (MOB: 5)⁵² As Dionysos appears to each in turn, we witness a violent release of that which has been denied, with the power to overturn the lives not only of the characters themselves but also of those around them. With this in mind we can see how the myth of the Bacchae is used to express a challenge to the dominant order, as 'possession' is given political agency; here an abandonment of control can be understood, Lan asserts, as "an act of resistance". (MOB: 6) However, it is evident that not all the characters' experiences can be seen as liberating, the most obvious counter-example being Marcia, discussed above.

The primary means by which this disruptive spirit of possession makes itself manifest within the play is through the non-logocentric medium of dance. The body, associated within the dominant cultural tradition with the primitive and pre-linguistic, can as Helen

⁵¹ Victor Seidler has explored this issue in depth. He states that for men work "is more than a source of dignity and pride. It is the very source of masculine identity, so that without work - a common condition in the 1980s - it is as if men cease to exist at all. It is as if as men we do not have an identity which belongs to ourselves, but an identity which is externally defined and only exists as a reflection of a working situation: so when men lose their jobs, they often lose a sense of themselves." Seidler, Victor (1989) *Rediscovering Masculinity*: London, Routledge, 151-52.

⁵² Whilst the character of Paul, as a white successful male businessman, can hardly be considered marginalised, he is nevertheless in danger as a result of driving himself 'over the limit'; obsessed with profit, unwilling to take a holiday (unless he takes work with him), he epitomises one familiar image of the 'eighties man' in Britain.

be classified as the dangerous 'other' to culture: as a thing that speaks of nature, it has to be surrounded by [...] rituals and controlled through manners and covered in appropriate dress and adornments, in order to prevent it seeping out or breaking through into and contaminating its privileged 'other', culture, reason, civilisation.⁵³

In *A Mouthful of Birds* we see just such a seepage, particularly evident in the three dance sequences involving the whole company. In 'Fruit Ballet' the characters' movements - derived from the action of eating fruit - express "*the sensuous pleasures of eating and the terrors of being torn up*". (MOB: 28) At the end of Act One, 'Extreme Happiness' physicalises for us the characters' individual memories of ecstasy, then unites them under a waterfall of wine in "*a moment of severe physical pleasure*". (MOB: 49) Finally, in 'The Death of Pentheus', fragments of the earlier dances are repeated to reveal the act of murder as the culmination of both violence and joy (MOB: 66-67). Whilst initially the danced sequences might be perceived as at least formally separate from the dramatic, at the point of Pentheus' murder, where the actors are dressed in the clothes of their main characters, the boundaries are shattered; 'savage' past and 'civilised' present merge into one.

This same pattern of bodily disruption and challenge to the symbolic order⁵⁴ can be traced within the dramas of the individual characters. The world of the businessman, Paul, is governed by the principles of capitalism; the animals he exports have no reality for him other than as profit-making commodities. When the presence of the dancing pig forces itself into his consciousness, he finds all his perceptions challenged:

PAUL: Have you looked at their mouths? They've eaten babies. They can bite through metal. And at the same time they are so gentle. You can stroke their ears. Their ears have blue veins. (MOB: 43)

Paul's appreciation of the pig's potential for power (as opposed to the display of it) can evidently be read as a critical comment on masculinity. At the same time, this transformation of consciousness could also be regarded as a reversal of the processes

⁵³ Thomas, Helen (1995) *Dance, modernity and culture*: London, Routledge, 7.

⁵⁴ Such disruptions could be understood in a Kristevan sense as the impact of the feminine semiotic upon the patriarchal symbolic order; see Kristeva, Julia (1980) *Desire in Language*: Oxford, Blackwell.

of 'enlightenment', in the terms used by Horkheimer and Adorno:

Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power.⁵⁵

The pig heals Paul from this state of alienation, to the point where all distance is abandoned and he finds himself falling in love with the animal as an equal. The terror and delight of the collapse of boundaries is poignantly expressed as the two dance "tenderly, dangerously, joyfully" (MOB: 46) in a return journey from enlightenment, back to myth.

Through the character of Dan, the vicar, we see most vividly how violence and pleasure are conflated in the act of dance.⁵⁶ Dan has become a convicted multiple killer, a seemingly androgynous figure whom the prison authorities literally cannot place. Dan dances for women and men within prison, giving each precisely the dance they long for; we are told of the first 'victim' that "[w]atching it, she dies of pleasure". (MOB: 37) The performer's doubling of Dan and Dionysos offers one of the play's clearest parallels; each character offers both men and women a means of release from the confinement of their socially constructed gender roles, even if this takes the form of extreme violence, or has violent consequences. Despite his implied association with Dionysos, however, Dan rejects the status of a god: "God makes and destroys. I make and destroy nothing. I do man's work. I transform." (MOB: 39) Nonetheless, Dan's 'transformations' result in a series of actual human deaths; the claim that he is giving each victim what they long for should be considered critically by an audience which will have heard similar statements attributed to our own society's convicted serial killers.⁵⁷

However, an acceptance of the principle that death at least might be transformative rather than destructive is enlightening for an understanding of *A Mouthful of Birds*

⁵⁵ Horkheimer, Max & Adorno, Theodor (1947) 'The Concept of Enlightenment': in Kearney, Richard & Rainwater, Mara eds. (1996) *The Continental Philosophy Reader*: London, Routledge, 200.

⁵⁶ Hersh (1992) *op.cit.*, 420-1.

⁵⁷ The story of Dan lends weight to the theme, considered later in relation to Lena, that 'power' unleashed in this way must be accompanied by an awareness of responsibility.

climactic violent moment: the killing of Pentheus. An important difference between this sequence and that of Dan's dancing in the prison is that here the killing is of *Pentheus*; in other words, the murder occurs within the play's mythological dimension, even if a series of parallels have been established between the mythic and the contemporary characters. The doubling of roles aligns Pentheus with Derek; the implication is that both might be characterised by an overt, even aggressive assertion of masculinity and an apparent refusal to tolerate perceived effeminacy. In the opening scene of Act 2 we are shown Derek's 'possession' by the spirit of the nineteenth century French hermaphrodite Herculine/Abel Barbin, in a provocative exploration of gender ambiguity.⁵⁸ Derek's encounter with Herculine - crossing geographical, temporal and sexual boundaries - is a journey "into the unknown". (MOB: 52) As Herculine speaks, she gives Derek a series of objects from her past life; as he receives them, one by one - a book, a rose, scissors and comb, a crucifix, a shawl and a petticoat - he moves closer to 'becoming' her. Derek now adopts Herculine's words for his own, a set of memories newly discovered:

DEREK: (...) The bishop, very kind, his own doctor, yes I should be declared a man, the documents, Sara's grief, have some tart dear daughter, couldn't I have asked to marry her, goodbye dear daughter (*takes the lace shawl*) (MOB: 54)

As Derek speaks, Herculine takes away the objects which have been potent in assisting Derek's transformation, or possession. The sequence expresses the gradual and painful loss of a feminine identity; his final cry is "couldn't you have stayed?", a call not only to the beloved Sara of the speech but also to the self he has been forced to deny. (MOB: 54)⁵⁹ In response to his question, Herculine turns back and kisses him on the neck; whilst this clearly has vampiric connotations of the transfer of lifeblood, the image (which is reproduced in the text) also startlingly resembles, as Diamond points out, the 'impossible' two-headed hermaphroditic body.⁶⁰ (MOB: 53)

⁵⁸ For a fuller consideration of the potentially subversive power of the androgynous body in relation to this sequence, see Babbage, Frances & Llewellyn-Jones, Margaret (1994) 'A Mouthful of Birds: Questions of Creativity and Co-operation': in *Contemporary Theatre Review* (1994) Vol. 2 Part 1, 52-53.

⁵⁹ This sense of painful separation from the feminine is discussed at length by Cixous, and challenged by her within *The Name of Oedipus: Song of the Forbidden Body*. See Chapter Five.

⁶⁰ Diamond (1988) *op.cit.*, 276.

In *A Mouthful of Birds*, then, the killing of Pentheus is not the purely destructive, vengeful act which it is in *The Bacchae*. The words of Dan/Dionysos have already hinted to us that this is not destruction, but transformation. In Derek's address to the audience at the play's end, he celebrates his new transsexual body, accepts the surgical 'ripping apart' which has been the means of creating it. He asks:

Was I this all the time? I've almost forgotten the man who used to possess this body. I can't remember what he used to be frightened of. (MOB: 71)

For Derek, sexual transformation is really a process of rediscovery; he now reflects on his life *before* the encounter with Dionysos as a state of possession.

As the Herculine Barbin scene shows, speech as well as the body offers a channel for the entry of myth. The sequences with Lena offer another striking example where the verbal text appears to offer a way in for the supernatural. Lena vainly tries to close her ears to the promptings of a spirit which rails against her toleration of her husband's presence; a babble ensues in which Roy's ineffectual attempt to understand what's wrong and Lena's assurances are distorted by what can be interpreted as the vocalisation of Lena's unconscious:

ROY: Have you gone off me?
I don't need to stick around
where I'm not wanted.

LENA: Of course you're wanted.

SPIRIT: His eyes have got red
lines. His fingernails have
got muck under./The hairs
in his arse are stuck
together. His cock's got
goo coming out. His feet
are full of black cracks.
(MOB: 27)

After a series of verbal and physical struggles, Lena gives in to the spirit's repeated promptings to kill her baby. To her horror, this does not result in a cathartic purge of her violent feelings and the disruptive spirit still hovers near. By the end of the play Lena has recognised that an aspect of herself has been uncovered that will remain with her, that what has happened cannot be regarded as a traumatic and abnormal episode now able to be forgotten:

LENA: I remember I enjoyed doing it. It's nice to make someone alive and it's

nice to make someone dead. Either way. That power is what I like best in the world. The struggle is every day not to use it. (MOB: 70)

Although *A Mouthful of Birds* thus makes use of techniques which imply a challenge to civilised order by forces of unreason, clearly the play does not advocate an uncritical celebration of the irrational. As Lena's story suggests, the discovery of power must be accompanied by a recognition and acceptance of responsibility.

Of the seven, the only character who uncovers power which she can barely contain and does not know what to do with, is Doreen. Interestingly, it is she who initially seems closest to the elements of the myth. At the start of the play we learn that she ran away from her husband and - to him, inexplicably - slept out in the open; Doreen isn't seeking Bacchic revelry, however, but space and "peace and quiet". (MOB: 22) Despite this assertion, it is not quiet that she needs but an outlet for her anger and emotion; peace cannot be achieved until this is found. We see her in 'Hot Summer', receiving a massage which she hopes will ease the indefinable tension and nausea from which she is suffering:

DOREEN: Anywhere you touched me would hurt. And that's not even the worst. It's not so much as if I'm going to vomit but every bit of me is nauseated, my left foot wants to vomit, my blood - I'm completely full of this awful sickness. (MOB: 58)

Like Lena, Doreen feels herself possessed by a violent spirit she cannot resist. Here, as elsewhere in the play, this violence shows itself as potentially creative as well as apparently destructive. A seemingly trivial irritation over a neighbour's radio escalates to a point where Doreen attacks her with a knife, yet in the following scene we are shown that Doreen's power also brings with it psychic energies which enable her to make objects fly across the room - as Worth notes, an unexpected way into a new mental dimension; strength need not equal violence.⁶¹

Despite this moment of creativity and realised possibilities, Doreen cannot ultimately find for herself the new state of balance achieved by the other six characters:

DOREEN: I can find no rest. My head is filled with horrible images. I can't say

⁶¹ Worth (1989) *op.cit.*, 21.

I actually see them, it's more that I feel them. It seems that my mouth is full of birds which I crunch between my teeth. Their feathers, their blood and broken bones are choking me. I carry on my work as a secretary. (MOB: 71)

The taste in her mouth seems wild and alien, yet the birds she feels could represent the promise of flight - and freedom - which at present she cannot permit herself to accept. Doreen's struggle expresses vividly the dangers inherent in challenging the restrictive constructs of the dominant culture, and illustrates that rebellion or resistance are ultimately ineffectual if unsupported by a changed consciousness.

At the start of my discussion of *A Mouthful of Birds*, I drew attention to the particular collaborative process which led to the creation of the Joint Stock production. To overlook this aspect of the context of creation seems in the first place to limit understanding of the piece, which explicitly examines the construction of gender, and gender relations. *A Mouthful of Birds* poses questions: if feminism criticises male violence, how is it to regard similar behaviour in women, and if women seek power (social, economic, physical or sexual) what are the consequences of this for men? The story of the Bacchae is used as the basis for an exploration of myths of gender and culture, where changes within an individual are shown to have implications for the community as a whole. It is perhaps appropriate, then, that *A Mouthful of Birds* should be co-authored, a creative method which even more than usual demands a recognition of the place of the individual within a wider system.

A second issue arises when the aesthetic strategies within the piece are evaluated. In her study *Churchill, The Playwright*, Geraldine Cousin notes that the method adopted by Churchill at this stage in her playwriting career of working in close association with actors, directors and choreographers (as well as co-writers) has undoubtedly been influential in developing the "daring experimentation with structure" which is clearly evident in the text of *A Mouthful of Birds*.⁶² This offers an important challenge to any feminist perspective which seeks to argue a necessary relationship between gender and particular aesthetic strategies, suggesting that it was in fact the divergence from the solitary creative method of the (female) playwright towards a (gender-mixed)

⁶² Cousin (1989) *op.cit.*, 15.

collaborative and interdisciplinary approach - implying a need for greater flexibility and a consequent relaxation of authorial control - which was a key factor in determining the fragmented structure and dislocating effect of the performance.⁶³ *A Mouthful of Birds* is thus a piece which questions theatrical as well as thematic boundaries, one built upon tensions and oppositions inherent within the myth it reinvents for its contemporary audience.

Finally, I have written elsewhere about my own experience of staging *A Mouthful of Birds*, and so will comment only briefly on this production.⁶⁴ I co-directed the play with Margaret Llewellyn-Jones in 1992, working with a student cast. As I indicated in the introduction to this chapter, the context of reception - an intimate, black-box studio at University College Northampton⁶⁵, with an audience from the academic community - was very different from that of the original event. I will conclude this section with a few observations about the experience of mounting the production, looking in particular at staging choices made and the significance of these in terms of the communication of meaning.

At the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, the proscenium arch framed a series of rooms organised to resemble an opened-out dolls' house. We chose instead to stage the play using as much of the space as possible, with areas of seating at three points in the studio; actors and audience were thus brought into close (perhaps uncomfortably close) proximity. Characters were associated, within this staging, with 'home' psychic spaces, where their key experiences took place: for example, Lena was domestically trapped on top of a scaffold, whilst beneath it was Yvonne's consulting room.⁶⁶ The staging was designed to include as many levels and directions as possible, to allow

⁶³ Cousin's stress on working methods and influences can be contrasted with, for example, Elin Diamond's reading of *A Mouthful of Birds* which draws on concepts of *écriture féminine*: see Diamond (1988) *op.cit.*. However, I am not arguing that the particular formal characteristics I have identified here are not present elsewhere in Churchill's work, only that this period of working with Joint Stock was highly influential in encouraging the willingness to experiment with structure so much in evidence in later pieces such as *The Skriker* (1994).

⁶⁴ Babbage & Llewellyn-Jones (1994) *op.cit.*.

⁶⁵ At the time of the production, the institution's title was Nene College of Higher Education.

⁶⁶ The set design for the production was primarily the work of Margaret Llewellyn-Jones. She discusses the reasons for decisions made in some detail in Babbage & Llewellyn-Jones (1994) *op.cit.*, 50ff.

multiple points of entry (physically, for the performers, and visually and mentally, for the spectators). This was intended both to soften rigid boundaries between actor and audience, and to reveal the overlapping of characters' experiences as their home spaces were abandoned during sequences of collective transformation. We thus sought to reflect theatrically the blurring of distinctions between safe and dangerous ground so central to the play, and to the myth. In bringing the audience physically closer to the action we tried to create an Artaudian merging of spectator and spectacle, evoking "the scene of carnival where there is no stage, no theatre".⁶⁷ We hoped that by extending the 'total theatre' discourse suggested to us by the text⁶⁸, the transformational quality of the released energies - the return of the repressed, perhaps - would be more powerfully experienced by performers and audience alike. Whether our choices had this effect in practice was, as it turned out, a matter of debate.

Audience responses to the production were varied, as one would expect. At the special seminar performance of the play⁶⁹, spectators debated at some length the question of the staging's impact. Some felt that although we had moved a long way away from the layout of the original proscenium arch setting, the production could valuably have been developed further along Artaudian lines. Others, however, commented that their close proximity to the action had increased their sense of themselves as voyeurs; rather than feeling immersed in a pleasurable, total theatre experience, they offered self-identifications ranging from privileged observer to reluctant, or guilty, witness. Thus, although the production met with a largely favourable reception, the 'problem' remained that for some spectators we were making them watch scenes to which they were unwilling to be exposed. This echoes the responses to the original production, discussed earlier in the chapter, where critics resented being shown in the theatre material they believed belonged in the rehearsal room.

⁶⁷ Kristeva (1980) *op.cit.*, 79.

⁶⁸ I have commented on the open, multi-directional staging; in developing a sense of a total theatre, the production also involved use of polyphonic sound, a 'language of lighting', and repetitive, ritualised gesture, as well as the dance sequences indicated by the text.

⁶⁹ The final performance of the run was the focus of a one-day conference on Women's Writing in Performance held at Nene College on November 30th 1992, under the auspices of the Reading University-based seminar group, chaired by Anna MacMullan, for research in this field. One issue discussed at the conference was, of course, that *A Mouthful of Birds* cannot be unproblematically considered a piece of 'women's writing'.

I can offer no straightforward interpretation of these diverse responses, nor do I feel that collectively they offer evidence to determine how far the text of *A Mouthful of Birds* provides an effective blueprint for a fully realised theatrical performance. What the experience of mounting the production confirmed for me, however, is that the play remains a difficult, genuinely provocative piece of work. It is an ongoing experiment rather than an expression of the results; it exposes that which is fearful, sickening and even ridiculous, as well as that which might prove inspiring or liberating. In this sense it is a courageous piece. *A Mouthful of Birds* deals with the border crossings of acceptability, not simply within its narrative of possession and murder, but in its actual realisation on the stage. The play is not about transgression; it is an embodiment of it.

The noise of myth:

Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*

MALE CHORUS: Fate is irresistible.

FEMALE CHORUS: And there is no escape.

KING PANDION: And now we must applaud the actors. (LON: 13)

Listen. This is the noise of myth. It makes
the same sound as shadow. Can you hear it?

Eavan Boland, 'The Journey' (quoted in LON: xi)

Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* is a re-visioning which weaves myths together in order to ask questions of its audience, for example: What is myth? What meanings might myths hold for contemporary society? What role do the theatrical conventions of classical tragedy play in mediating our reception of the stories told? How far can an audience claim the safety of distance from the implications of theatrical action? The two quotations above - both included in the published playtext, although only the first is delivered within the context of the action - illustrate Wertenbaker's belief that the content of myth is integrally bound up with its form of transmission. The first extract, taken from the play-within-a-play (Scene 5) where the characters witness a performance of Euripides' *Hippolytus*, suggests that the tragic consequences of the

characters' actions are as certain and predictable as the ritual of the audience's response; this is myth made authoritative, formally offered and received. The second extract, offered by Wertenbaker as a kind of Foreword, expresses a contrasting version of myth as a whisper, an echo, a dark reflection. Taken together, the two quotations imply that whilst myth may be granted an official place as part of the dominant culture it is not wholly containable, but exists independently as a dark undercurrent, perhaps only barely perceptible. This exploration of official and unofficial functions of mythology becomes centrally important in Wertenbaker's play and will be discussed in detail.

As noted earlier, *The Love of the Nightingale* was first presented by the RSC in 1988 at Stratford's studio The Other Place, and subsequently transferred to The Pit, at London's The Barbican. The play - which has a cast of sixteen, eight men and eight women - was given another production a year later in Los Angeles, and continues to be a popular choice with amateur and professional groups.⁷⁰ Timberlake Wertenbaker has worked more or less exclusively within the British theatre, although she is French-American by birth and French-educated.⁷¹ While some critics appear to have problems 'pinning down' her cultural identity, Wertenbaker herself embraces plurality:

I feel I am an American but not completely [...]. I grew up in Europe so I am not an expatriate. Really, that's just narrow nationalism and I don't know why people can't accept that you can have several cultures. The whole thing about being a writer is that you can have a floating identity anyway.⁷²

Nevertheless, despite this assertion, issues of culture, language and the construction of identity are repeatedly addressed within Wertenbaker's plays. Whilst the examination of gender relations is a prominent focus of her work, this is always seen alongside questions of race and class rather than in isolation. In *The Grace of Mary Traverse* (1985), for example, Wertenbaker depicts an upper-class woman whose experiences teach her that she cannot, after all, act with the authority she has seen men enjoy. In *Our Country's Good* (1988) she examines the interactions of officers, male and female convicts and native aborigines within the New South Wales 'community', revealing a

⁷⁰ For a detailed consideration of the different responses of reviewers to the British and American productions see Carlson (1993) *op.cit.*.

⁷¹ DiGaetani, John (1991) *A Search for a Postmodern Theater: Interviews with Contemporary Playwrights*. Westport, Greenwood Press, 265.

⁷² Quoted in Carlson (1993) *op.cit.*, 268-9.

complex network of power and privilege.⁷³ In Felski's terms, this emphasis on the intersection of spheres of experience would locate Wertenbaker within the broad tendencies of Anglo-American feminism, which has been reluctant to consider gender in isolation from other determining influences upon cultural production.⁷⁴

The Love of the Nightingale, as I have stated, brings together a number of myths. Centrally, the play offers a retelling of the relatively unknown story of the sisters Philomele and Procne.⁷⁵ In this myth as it is recounted by Ovid, Procne, who is the elder, marries the Thracian king Tereus and leaves her native Athens. To ease her new-found loneliness, Procne asks her husband to bring her sister to stay with her as a companion. Tereus complies, but finds himself overcome with passion for Philomele; he rapes her on the journey, then cuts out her tongue so that she cannot tell anyone of his crime. Philomele nevertheless manages to communicate what has happened to her sister through the seemingly innocent activity of weaving a tapestry. As a revenge against Tereus the two women kill Itys, the King's heir, and present his body to his father in the form of a cannibal banquet. When Tereus realises what has happened he chases the women to kill them, but as he does so all three are transformed into birds.⁷⁶ Whilst it seems likely that Ovid's version of the myth was Wertenbaker's source, she makes two important alterations which should be noted. First, Philomele succeeds in communicating with her sister, not through a tapestry but through a form of theatre; secondly, although Itys is sacrificed he is not given to this father to eat. The significance of both these changes will be considered later.

In addition to the version of the myth as it is told by Ovid, Wertenbaker works from the fragments which remain to us of Sophocles' lost play *Tereus*. Two of these are included in the published text as part of the Foreword - alongside the lines from Boland

⁷³ Wertenbaker (1985) *The Grace of Mary Traverse*, in Wertenbaker (1989) *op.cit.*, 55-130; Wertenbaker (1988) *Our Country's Good*: London, Methuen.

⁷⁴ Felski (1989) *op.cit.*, 20-21.

⁷⁵ I do know of two poems which are inspired by the myth: Arnold's 'Philomela' (1853) and Swinburne's 'Itylus' (1866). Arnold, Matthew (1997) *Poems by Matthew Arnold*: Toronto, University of Toronto Press; Swinburne, Algernon Charles (1997) *Poems and Ballads*: Toronto, University of Toronto Press.

⁷⁶ Ovid (1971) *op.cit.*, 146-53.

quoted above - and both seem to belong to Procne. The words of the first extract deal explicitly with the position of women within a society which 'markets them out' in marriage and sends them far away from country and friends, at the mercy of a husband who was not of their choosing; the speech concludes that "after the yoking of a night" women, are "bound to like" their new homes and "deem it well." (LON: xi) The second extract is briefer:

Much
I envy thee thy life: and most of all,
That thou hast never had experience
of a strange land. (LON: xi)

These speeches of Procne's are deeply expressive of a sense of alienation and an awareness of lack of power within society, themes which Wertenbaker picks up on to explore in her own play. Although these lines are not spoken as part of the production it seems likely that they would be included in the programme and that, as Jennifer Wagner notes,

if an audience member reads those lines and sees their source - the ancient play *Tereus* - s/he might assume that such a play must spotlight that Thracian king and his "tragic" intemperance, and might also wonder, reading Procne's heartbreaking speech, what a tragedy called *Procne* might sound like? or one called *Philomele*?⁷⁷

Whilst the Philomele/Procne story provides the basis for *The Love of the Nightingale*, the play also incorporates the myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus and additionally brings in Bacchic ritual and a character named Niobe who carries some connotations, perhaps with an ironic edge, of the Niobe of classical mythology.⁷⁸ The Phaedra story provides a further important strand of Wertenbaker's play, but whilst this myth - familiar to us

⁷⁷ Wagner, Jennifer (1995) 'Formal Parody and the Metamorphosis of the Audience in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*': in *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal*: (1995) Vol.31 No.3, 231.

⁷⁸ Niobe is described as "the personification of maternal sorrow". According to Greek legend she was a mother of fourteen children, who taunted Latona who had only two; however as these two were Apollo and Diana this seems particularly unwise, and indeed Latona commanded her children to revenge her by killing of all of Niobe's sons and daughters. This was carried out and Niobe, inconsolable, wept herself to death when she changed into a stone from which water ran "Like Niobe, all tears" (Shakespeare: *Hamlet*, I,ii). This account of the myth is taken from Cooper, J.C. ed. (1995) *Brewer's Book of Myth and Legend*: Oxford, Helicon, 198. Whilst no reference is made in *The Love of the Nightingale* specifically to Niobe's children, she is presented as one who has lost everything including family, pride, beauty, lovers and country. However, the ironic edge is apparent in that if this is Niobe, her tears have run dry; she is now entirely accepting of her own and other women's lack of power, and she is a poor guardian for Philomele as she more or less offers up her young charge to the 'fate' of Tereus' lust.

through Euripides and Racine - tells of a woman's illicit desire for her stepson, *The Love of the Nightingale* gives us both this story and a reversal of it in which it is the brother-in-law Tereus who desires Philomele. Locating Phaedra within a cultural tradition of 'wicked stepmothers', and noting that in this intertwining it is this myth which is the better-known, Joe Winston suggests that Wertenbaker is thus deprivileging

the dominant discourse of the Phaedra syndrome by having it interanimate with a relatively unknown myth which treats the same themes of sex, guilt, shame and vengeance but with crucial underlying gender differences.⁷⁹

Although Euripides' *Hippolytus* is presented to us as a play-within-a-play, Wertenbaker carefully juxtaposes this myth with that of Philomele and Procne in a way which indicates clearly that more than a literal 'parallel' is being offered. In the first place, although Phaedra is tortured by guilt for her love it is never consummated; this is in direct and ironic contrast to Tereus who, although he explicitly aligns himself with her - telling Philomele "I am Phaedra" - feels no shame and will use violence to bring about the end he desires. (LON: 29) Secondly, although both the subjects of their loves are virginal, Hippolytus is presented as chaste and uninterested in sexuality, whereas Philomele is shown as warm, sensuous and at ease with her own desire. This provides a particularly important shift away from the Euripidean text, in which female sexual guilt is a central theme. Thus while explicit reference is made to the Phaedra myth at specific points within the play, it can also be seen to operate more subtly as an implicit subtext.

The action of *The Love of the Nightingale* takes place within three settings: Athens, Thrace, and the sea voyage in between the two. These settings, or locations, are distinguished by marked cultural differences. The first of these, Athens, is represented as highly civilised; it is the centre for philosophy and the arts and has given Procne and Philomele an upbringing which has taught them to love rationality and clarity. Within this context, the Athenian theatre is offered as that society's highest achievement. It presents, as King Pandion states, "the uncomfortable folds of the human heart", but in

⁷⁹ Winston, Joe (1995) 'Re-Casting the Phaedra Syndrome: Myth and Morality in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*': in *Modern Drama* (1995) Vol.38 No.4, 511-12.

a manner so formally controlled as to permit its audience to retain a very comfortable distance. Laughing, Philomele tells her father: "I'm not Hippolytus. You haven't cursed me. And Tereus isn't Phaedra, look." (LON: 12)

After the enlightenment of Athens, Procne finds her new home of Thrace darkly incomprehensible. This sense of cultural strangeness is vividly expressed in the scenes between Procne and the Female Chorus. Procne longs for her homeland where "[e]verything that was had a word and every word was something. None of these meanings half in the shade, unclear" (LON: 7). Thrace, on the other hand, seems to her a place of silences and secrecy, where the women express themselves through the performance of Bacchic rites, "Barbarian practices" of which she deeply disapproves. (LON: 7) Wertenbaker thus appears initially to establish a binary opposition between the two places and their associated cultural practices:

PROCNE: I am an Athenian: I know the truth is found by logic and happiness
lies in the truth.

HERO: Truth is full of darkness.

PROCNE: No, truth is good and beautiful. See... (Pause.) I must have
someone to talk to.

JUNE: We've tried. See...

HERO: She turns away. (LON: 7)

Procne longs for the kind of conversation she is used to with her sister and finds her new companions inadequate substitutes, ignoring their halting attempts to communicate with her. Thus the sense of what it means to be a woman comes across very differently in relation to these two places. The Athenian women are verbally assertive, confident in their ability to participate in the discourses of rationality; the Thracian women are hesitant, reliant on metaphor and image to communicate ideas which are 'sensed' rather than intellectually understood. Whilst these cultural differences of thought and language are crucial within the play, it is clear that in social terms the women are in essentially similar positions; in both countries they are ultimately in "the power of a lord or master" (LON: 20), but the Thracian women recognise this while the Athenians have been

educated to believe they have a freedom which, the play demonstrates, they do not.⁸⁰

Between Athens and Thrace is the open sea, a desolate beach where Tereus insists on making camp, and in the distance the wild Mount Athos, a place where according to the ship's Captain the inhabitants "kill all women, even female animals". (LON: 15) In this hostile environment Tereus falsely tells Philomele that her sister is dead, kills the Captain when he learns that Philomele actively desires him, and then takes her by force for himself when she will not submit willingly. On one level, Tereus' choice of this place can be understood in pragmatic terms; Philomele is alone, friendless, and there is no one else there who will dare to defy the will of the King. Niobe, who appears to be there as her chaperone, will not intervene. She believes Philomele's rape to be as inevitable as the rape by Athens of her own small island. (LON: 30-31)⁸¹ On another level, however, much stress is placed on the location's wildness and isolation. Philomele describes it as a "place forsaken by the gods", an irony when Tereus insists repeatedly on the presence and will of the gods as a means of justifying his actions: "Who can resist the gods? Those are your words, Philomele. [...] The god is implacable". (LON: 29) It seems that Tereus needs an uncivilised location for his own savage act. He tries to pretend that this forced union is happening out of 'real time' and will have no consequences; when he realises that Philomele is serious in her intention to ensure that the men and women of Thrace know what sort of man their king is, he cuts out her tongue.

This theme of speech and the silencing of speech is central to *The Love of the Nightingale*. In this context it is interesting to note that the source for the play should be a myth which is somewhat marginalised⁸² and an earlier play which is all but lost to us,

⁸⁰ This 'opposition' between the language of the Athenian and Thracian women could be analysed as an opposition of patriarchal discourse and *écriture féminine*, as the former privileges linearity and logic and the latter, circularity, metaphor and ellipse. However, there can be no simplistic applications of this theory; it must be noted firstly that Philomele and Procne are confident that they have access to the former, and secondly that the latter does not prove initially to be an effective way of communicating with Procne.

⁸¹ The parallel Niobe suggests exists between women and countries gives further evidence to show that Wertenbaker intends this re-visioning of myth to be understood in terms beyond the limits of gender relations.

⁸² I say this because several major works of reference do not mention the myth at all. See for example (a) Larrington ed. (1992) *op.cit.*, or (b) Walker (1995) *op.cit.*.

itself silenced. The theme of speech and silence is also important in Ovid's telling of the myth. Following the rape, Ovid has Philomele assure Tereus:

I shall come forward before your people, and tell my story. If I am to be kept shut up in the woods, I shall fill the forest with my voice [...]. Heaven will hear my cries, and any god that dwells there!⁸³

It is Tereus' recognition of the potency of words which leads him to cut out Philomele's tongue. Wertenbaker makes an important theatrical decision in choosing to set the rape itself 'offstage', but to insist on our watching a graphic representation of the cutting out of the tongue. The purpose of this distinction is not so much to suggest that the latter crime is more serious than the former, but to bring this theme of the silencing of the socially marginalised - here the silencing of women - shockingly into the foreground. Wertenbaker's use of this violent image serves as a very direct way into the debate on the relationship between language and power. Further, Wertenbaker frames this moment in such a way as to make it impossible to overlook its political implications. Earlier, the act of questioning has been described by the play's Male Chorus as "the child's instinct, suppressed in the adult" for the sake of order - but order at a high price. (LON: 22) Philomele is represented as a questioner, a challenger, throughout the play. She asks her sister about sex: "How can I know if no one will tell me?" (LON: 2) Language has been her means of making sense of the world. After Tereus rapes her she patently struggles to understand what has happened, and why:

PHILOMELE: I was the cause, wasn't I? Was I? I said something. What did I do? Something in my walk? If I had sung a different song? My hair up, my hair down? (LON: 34)

At this point she is effectively silencing herself and Tereus need do nothing. This is the familiar myth of rape - that the victim brought it on herself - and one which Niobe seems to subscribe to when she anticipates bathing Philomele's cheeks first, as "that's where it hurts most. The shame". (LON: 31) However, Philomele is quick to work through this and reject it, and begins to fight back with words: "It was your act. It was you. I caused nothing." (LON: 34) Tereus cannot tolerate her repeated challenges to his authority; he cannot explain his actions in a way that 'makes sense' to her and so for the sake of order silences the questioner, but in doing so is forced to reveal that his order is

⁸³ Ovid (1971) *op.cit.*, 149.

one built on lies, secrecy, violence and enforced obedience.⁸⁴

In *The Love of the Nightingale*, then, it is the cutting of the tongue rather than the rape itself which leads eventually to the sisters' murder of Itys. This is the most violent act of oppression; as Niobe explains, "[t]he silence of the dead can turn into a wild chorus. But the one alive who cannot speak, that one has truly lost all power." (LON: 36) That Wertenbaker intends the audience to be left in no doubt about the contemporary relevance of this act is illustrated by her use of the Female Chorus, who address us in a moment of complete articulacy:

HELEN: Why are races exterminated?

HERO: Why do white people cut off the words of blacks?

IRIS: Why do people disappear? The ultimate silence.

ECHO: Not even death recorded.

HELEN: Why are little girls raped and murdered in the car parks of dark cities?

IRIS: What makes the torturer smile? (LON: 45) ⁸⁵

We could add further questions of our own, the naive and unsophisticated ones it seems almost foolish to ask in an age where extreme acts of oppression have become commonplace. Wertenbaker implies that even if we have all but given up hope of finding answers, we still have a moral responsibility to ask questions. But if power silences the questioner, "imprisons the mind that asks", "cuts out its tongue", how can opposition be voiced? The killing of Itys is thus represented as more than a simple act of revenge; it is seen to be what happens when all rules are abandoned, the consequence of what is here the literal removal of freedom of speech.⁸⁶ This is

⁸⁴ The use of deception and violence in order to maintain authority is also a theme within Haasse's *A Thread in the Dark*, as I have discussed; see Chapter Two.

⁸⁵ Reviewing the production, Kenneth Hurren appears to find Wertenbaker's contemporary cross-referencing absurd: "At one point the incidence of rape in car parks is mentioned. *It's sad when you want to be meaningful and it sounds so frivolous*" (original italics). I find it hard to imagine how such a reference could have been found "frivolous". It is interesting, though, that Hurren might have found the play's treatment of violence much more "meaningful" had Wertenbaker been less direct; perhaps for "frivolous" we might read 'jarring' or 'discomforting'? Hurren (1988) Review of *The Love of the Nightingale*: *The Mail on Sunday* 13.11.88.

⁸⁶ In a recent interview, Wertenbaker states: "I [...] feel very strongly that if you can't speak, if you don't have the language, the only way you can express yourself is violently, and I think we have evidence of it all around. If you can speak, you can at least make your claims, hope to be listened to, make more claims, listen to the other side. Without that, yes, I think there will be nothing but violence. And the sections of society now, the people who have no voice, are violent, inevitably. If you refuse to listen to a section of society, you are silencing them." In Stephenson, Heidi & Langridge, Natasha eds. (1997) *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*: London, Methuen, 143.

perhaps the reason for Wertenbaker's choice to divert from the myth as it is told in Ovid, whereby once killed, Itys' body is cooked and presented to Tereus to eat⁸⁷. Her alternative offers a moment not so much of cruelty as of clarity:

(The body of ITYS is revealed.)

PROCNE: If you bend over the stream and search for your reflection, Tereus, this is what it looks like. (LON: 47)

As Itys is a child, he is the metaphorical and actual embodiment of the future; as he is Tereus' child, he promises a future that is horrifying. Procne tells her husband: "You, Tereus. You bloodied the future. For all of us. We don't want it." (LON: 47) The last scene of the play following the metamorphosis shows 'Itys and the birds'; Procne has become a swallow and Philomele a nightingale, her voice thus magnificently restored.⁸⁸ We see Philomele training Itys - the next generation - to ask questions of his own; this is despite her acknowledgement that it was her own insistence on her right to challenge which led to her being brutally silenced.

Alongside the theme of power forcibly silencing its opponents, *The Love of the Nightingale* explores ideas of voluntary silence. Wertenbaker achieves this principally through representation of the contrasting behaviours of the play's Male and Female Chorus. Despite their differences - the members of the Male Chorus appear verbally confident, whilst the Female Chorus members are hesitant - both groups are initially characterised by a passivity towards the injustice that goes on around them that amounts to moral irresponsibility. Clearly, silence has its attractions; after all Niobe's response to the mutilation of Philomele is to wonder: "Perhaps she likes being silent. No responsibility." (LON: 36) The Male Chorus are very aware that questions "are like earthquakes", and because they "wouldn't want to live in a world that's always

⁸⁷ "Tereus [...] ate what was before him, swallowing down mouthfuls of flesh that was his own. He was so utterly blind to what was going on, that he called out: 'Bring Itys here!' Procne could not conceal her cruel exultation. Eager to be the first to announce the catastrophe she had brought about, she told her husband: 'The boy you are asking for is here, inside, with you.'" Ovid (1971) *op.cit.*, 152.

⁸⁸ According to Robert Bell, the earliest versions of the myth had Procne as the nightingale and Philomele as the swallow (despite the fact that the word *philomel* meant nightingale in ancient Greek); the late Latin poets then reversed the birds into which Procne and Philomele were changed, he suggests, "perhaps because the irony of having a tongueless woman transformed into a sweet singer was too much to resist." Bell (1991) *op.cit.*, 364.

shifting” they readily yield before authority. (LON: 22) The Female Chorus are similarly afraid of recrimination, but they are further held back by self-doubt:

HERO: Sometimes I feel I know things but I cannot prove that I know them or that what I know is true and when I doubt my knowledge it disintegrates into a senseless jumble of possibilities, a puzzle that will not be reassembled, the spider web in which I lie, immobile and truth paralysed. (LON: 20)

The Male Chorus take pains to explain and rationalise their own conservatism for the audience, in a manner that clearly draws attention to, and questions, their policy of non-intervention. The men assert that they have chosen to “be accurate, and [to] record” events rather than attempt to alter their outcome. (LON: 14) However, even that limited ambition is treated ironically when we realise that the Male Chorus somehow “did not see” the killing of the ship’s Captain, the rape of Philomele, or her brutal silencing. (LON: 24) Through these theatrical strategies Wertebaker parodies and questions a central convention of the Greek classical theatre: the chorus (as it were, ‘the people’) who comment on the development of the action from a position which is essentially peripheral to it.

While the Male Chorus remain dispassionate and unchanged throughout, the Female Chorus seem to undergo a metamorphosis of their own. For them, it is the cutting out of the tongue which leads to their overcoming the barrier of fear and inarticulacy, however clumsily. It is then - when oppressive power asserts itself so nakedly - that the women are forced to confront their own internalised police, and the relative safety of silence, submission and conformity to women’s ‘proper’ roles is abandoned. First, they assist Philomele and Procne in the killing of Itys, an act which initially takes place offstage and which the soldiers falsely claim to know nothing about. Second, they replay the murder onstage, thereby allowing the audience both to examine the women’s act critically without shock and to become yet more aware of the hypocrisy of the male characters:

JUNE: We show you a myth.

ECHO: Image. Echo.

HELEN: A child is the future.

HERO: This is what the soldiers did not see.

(ITYS *comes running in.*)

ITYS: That’s my sword. Give me my sword.

(114)

PROCNE: Itys.

ITYS: Give me my sword, slave, or I'll kick you. Kill you all. Cut off your heads. Pick out your eyes.

(ITYS goes for PHILOMELE. PROCNE holds him. PHILOMELE still has the sword. PHILOMELE brings the sword down on his neck. The FEMALE CHORUS close in front.) (LON: 46)

It is at this point that we become aware of the intersection within the play of yet another myth, here that of the Bacchae.⁸⁹ The women's Bacchic rites - a time when the normal restrictions on female behaviour are lifted - make it possible for Philomele to communicate with Procne, and additionally facilitate the execution of Itys. First, it is important to return to the question of Wertenbaker's decision to have her Philomele tell the story of her rape and mutilation through a form of theatre, rather than through a woven tapestry. Through the use of giant dolls, which we are told she has been making for years, Philomele is able to reenact the scene of her brutal encounter with Tereus "in a gross and comic way" as a spectacle for public entertainment (although the only audience she seeks is that of her sister). In an attempt to stop her, Niobe grabs hold of one of the dolls, and thus unwittingly assists Philomele's attempt to illustrate her original struggle; there's additional irony here in that the moment asks us to reconsider critically Niobe's earlier resigned acceptance of Philomele's 'fate'. (LON: 39-40). The assembled stage audience moves from laughter to discomfort, and finally drifts away; however, as Wagner points out

their disappearance [...] is only in body, as it were, for the burden to "react" to this spectacle becomes our own. [...] Philomele's parody of her own rape has the ultimate effect [...] of once again forcing the theater audience to confront its own kinship to the on-stage audience, who are able to laugh at violence, and to effectively shut their eyes to the real implications or consequences of their gazing upon those events.⁹⁰

This is a form of theatre very different from the high-culture entertainments of Athens; but if *Hippolytus* provided Tereus with a flawed justification for his actions, here Philomele 'makes a spectacle of herself' in order to expose him. Philomele's 'play' is grotesque, the huge dolls suggestive of the effigies of carnival procession. This point connects with my earlier consideration (in the introduction to this chapter) of women's

⁸⁹ The multiple resonances of this myth, especially in terms of gender issues, are of course discussed more fully earlier in this chapter in relation to *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds*.

⁹⁰ Wagner (1995) *op.cit.*, 244-45.

theatre within the public sphere as ‘carnavalesque’. Here, Wertenbaker presents the social reversal represented by the Bacchic festival as a genuine opportunity for challenge to authority, a crude revelation of the brutality exercised by those in power. In this moment, and in the staging of *Hippolytus*, Wertenbaker employs strategies of metatheatricity to ensure that the theatre audience cannot retain a comfortable ethical distance from the events they witness.

On stage, this is an important moment of understanding for Procne. She, who so much missed conversations with her sister, now has to draw the answers she needs from Philomele’s silence. At first, like Niobe, she looks in vain for that confirmation of her sister’s story that society has persuaded her she should expect: “There’s no shame in your eyes. Why should I believe you?” (LON: 41) Slowly, painfully, she learns to recognise the truth of what Philomele is telling her, without words:

(PHILOMELE *opens her mouth, slowly.*)

To do this. He would do this.

(*Pause.*)

Is that what the world looks like?

(*Pause.*)

Justice. (LON: 41)

Procne has learnt to understand what the Female Chorus had attempted to explain: that truth can be full of darkness, and that there is “[a]nother way of listening”. (LON: 21) Importantly, this understanding has been made possible through the Bacchic rites which she earlier condemned - from an ‘enlightened’ perspective - as barbaric.

Just as words and rational argument have ultimately proved insufficient for both Philomele and Procne, so must another way be found to force Tereus to recognise the enormity of his crime. Reasoned appeals cannot combat tyranny, as Philomele discovered: “There’s nothing inside you. You’re only full when you’re filled with violence.” (LON: 35) Gradually Wertenbaker makes her audience aware of the limitations and distortions of civilised Athenian culture. Although they have seen some of the contradictions of what is their fatherland, ideologically as well as emotionally⁹¹,

⁹¹ As Wagner notes, Philomele is beginning to be aware that the cultural practices of Athens, which she values so highly, nevertheless seem oddly unable to address the realities of the world around her; she asks her father: “Will the philosophers start speaking again after the war?” (LON: 4) Wagner (1995) *op.cit.*, 240.

nothing has prepared the two sisters for the darkness and irrationality they encounter in Tereus. Thrace then becomes not simply somewhere 'where bad things happen' - and indeed, Tereus' abuse of Philomele happens neither in Thrace nor Athens, but *between the two* - but rather offers alternative ways of understanding darker truths, the shadow that was always there as the other side of enlightenment and reason. However, the opposition Wertenbaker appears to propose between the values represented by Athens and Thrace is itself deconstructed. Whilst the Bacchic rites seem initially to frame the killing of Itys in a way we can recognise, there is no sense that the women are in any way possessed or otherwise 'beside themselves' when they carry out this act.⁹² The bacchae are described to us as savage, as drunken; yet it appears that the execution of Itys is carried out calmly, because it is morally necessary.

The final scene of the play does not merely pose questions for Itys, then, but also for the audience. As Echo has told us, this is a myth that has no end, only a metamorphosis. (LON: 47-48) *The Love of the Nightingale* similarly works to resist closure. Itys asks questions, but is puzzled when Philomele will not answer his last question - "What is right?" - in words, but sings instead. (LON: 49) What are we, the audience, to make of Philomele's response? Is it simply that she will not give all the answers, but believes that the questioner must discover them for himself? Maybe by giving Philomele song for her response, Wertenbaker aims to make us consider how far art can be expected to help us deal with ethical issues. A statement from the playwright makes explicit the role intended for her audience:

I don't think you can leave the theatre and go out and make a revolution. That's the naivety of the 1970s. But I do think you can make people change, just a little, by forcing them to question something, or by intriguing them, or giving them an image that remains with them. And that little change can lead to bigger changes. [...] Nor do I think that playwrights should have the answers. A play is like a trial: it goes before the jury, the audience, and they decide. [...] In some theatres in ancient Greece, the number of seats corresponded to the number of adult males with voting rights. I think that is right: theatre is for people who take responsibility.⁹³

⁹² Clearly this is in marked contrast to the scenes of murder in both *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds*; it could, however, be compared with the very deliberate killing of the children described in Rame's *Medea*.

⁹³ Quoted in Wagner (1995) *op.cit.*, 252.

Angela somehow understood, not just theoretically but sensuously and imaginatively, that we were living with constructs of ourselves, neither false nor true but mythical and alterable. It was of course a founding feminist perception.¹

These words are taken from Lorna Sage's obituary for the writer Angela Carter, printed in *The Guardian* the day after her death from lung cancer. It is perhaps ironic, given that Carter was not primarily a playwright, that it is her work which provided one of the main inspirations for this study; however, the popularity of her texts as sources for stage adaptation indicates that I am not alone in my sense of their immense theatrical potential. It is also worth noting that Carter has at times been very critical of feminist attraction to myth, referring to many mythic versions of women as "consolatory nonsenses", and stating further that myth "deals in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances".² Given these assertions, I could have chosen to place Carter's work earlier in this study, perhaps alongside Rame's witty and politically-motivated deconstructions. However, I believe that Carter is doing something rather different. She may, as she says, be "in the demythologising business"³, but nevertheless she is part of an ongoing tradition of *retelling*. She is a storyteller who draws on the stories we know and persuades them to reveal those we do not; whilst she might not seek to establish new myths in place of the old, there can be no doubt that her re-visionings have achieved recognition and acquired cultural status in their own right. What Carter does do, however, is challenge by subversion the myths which tyrannise us; her characters refuse to play along, instead creating their own new and radical scripts.

Similar strategies are used by Andrée Chedid in *The Goddess Lar*, the first text I

¹ Sage, Lorna (1992) 'Angela Carter: The soaring imagination': in *The Guardian* 17th Feb.

² Carter, Angela (1979) *The Sadeian Woman*: London, Virago, 5.

³ Carter, Angela (1983) 'Notes from the Front Line': in Carter (1998) *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*: London, Vintage, 38.

discuss in this chapter, although stylistically her work is very distinct from Carter's.⁴ The quotation with which I head this section can be brought to bear on Chedid's play, in which a young woman literally lives with, and serves, a patriarchally-constructed goddess of the home. Throughout the play the protagonist struggles to understand her own relationship to this mythic creation, in order to break its tyrannical hold over both herself and her family as a whole. In the play's concluding sections the woman deconstructs the goddess physically, pulling it apart to see what it is made of, whether there are any bits she wants to keep for the future. Here, and in Carter's *Vampirella* and *The Company of Wolves*⁵, the protagonists confront the burden of their inheritance and attempt - each in their own way - to strip away the mask.

Both Chedid and Carter emphasise the importance of language, its power, and, on another level, its impotence. Gynna, in Chedid's play, is almost wooed into submission by myth's soft poetry; Carter's Red Riding Hood must be attentive to the formulaic script of predator and victim, to find her moment to rewrite their story. The work of both writers, enacted, presents a complex dynamic of verbal and physical languages. *The Goddess Lar* introduces dance, not simply as a mode of self-expression, but as a strategy which urgently seeks to establish character-audience interaction; the dancing body and the spoken word are set against each other as rival modes of communication. In Carter's writing the dynamic of words and action operates differently (although of course, in adapting non-theatrical sources for the stage the adapter has freedom of choice as to the performance strategies employed). The potential in this interrelationship is explored most fully in my discussion of *The Company of Wolves*, in which adaptations across radio, film and theatre are compared. In each case the capabilities of the medium are exploited to articulate Carter's critical deconstruction

⁴ Chedid, Andrée (1977) *The Goddess Lar or Centuries of Women*: in Makward, Christiane & Miller, Judith eds. (1995) *Plays by French and Francophone Women: a critical anthology*: Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 171-95. All page references are from this edition and are indicated within the chapter by the abbreviation GL.

⁵ The short story versions of *The Company of Wolves* and *Vampirella* are published in Carter, Angela (1996) *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*: London, Vintage. Carter's radio plays, an opera and her theatre and film scripts are published in Carter, Angela (1997) *The Curious Room: Collected Dramatic Works*: London, Vintage. All quotations from the radio versions of *Vampirella* and *The Company of Wolves* and the film script of the latter will be taken from this edition and indicated by the abbreviation CR.

of myth, but also to respond, in dramatic form, to her sensuous word-pictures.

Each of the three pieces of theatre I discuss seeks to establish an intimate relationship with its audience. The stage productions of *Vampirella* and *The Company of Wolves* I examine both took place in small studio venues and sought, each in their own way, to draw the spectators into the imaginative world of the performance. In neither case was it felt that 'distance' should be established, spatially or intellectually; Carter seems to favour education through play rather than study. Close physical proximity to the performance challenges the safety of the audience's position, and this seems important; the productions I discuss did not attack or berate, but did insist that spectators acknowledge the direct relationship between what they saw and themselves - in every sense. For *The Goddess Lar* to work successfully as a piece of theatre and as a re-visioning of myth, the establishing of a mutually supportive actor-audience relationship is vitally important. Chedid specifies moments where audience participation can take place; even if the audience choose not to participate physically, their mental involvement must be total. This strategy is no gimmick. Chedid aims to enlist the audience's support for her protagonist, indicating the need to move, in confronting tyranny, from individual to collective resistance.

A central question posed by all the texts considered here is this: what will be the effects of challenging tradition? If we *can* shake off the old ways, what is to be put in their place? *The Goddess Lar* dramatises the fear and resistance experienced by 'Mann' when he learns that his wife has literally thrown the goddess - representing the values of female domesticity - out of the house. In panic he asks: "Without [the goddess], what will happen to me?" His own role is defined in relation to those of the women, and thus Gynna's desire for change threatens his own stability. Similarly in Carter's texts women, especially, refuse to play the role of victim. I consider in some detail the dynamic of predator and prey analysed in her important study *The Sadeian Woman*⁶, in which Carter challenges the binary opposition represented by Sade's characters Justine and Juliette. Through both the vampire Countess and Carter's Red Riding Hood we are invited to explore the possibility of a synthesis where submission and

⁶ Carter (1979) *op.cit.*

aggression, reason and passion, are combined. When these protagonists - and indeed, Chedid's Gynna - confront their oppressors, the results are unpredictable and from some perspectives problematic; nevertheless, I argue, they reveal the possibility of breaking the supposedly closed circuit of their mythic narratives.

When all three texts are considered in relation to the model of the feminist counter-public sphere, it becomes apparent that they resist straightforward categorisation in several ways. For example, Carter regarded herself as a feminist and her work as, therefore, necessarily informed by this perspective, yet some of the fiercest criticism she has received has come from feminist quarters. One reason for this lies in her persistent refusal to provide fictional role models.⁷ Her demythologising goes beyond a rejection of those images of Woman which so evidently do real women a disservice, to a deconstruction of further images to which feminism has, at times, been somewhat drawn. Carter's position, in effect, seems to be that *all* archetypes should be viewed with suspicion; feminism becomes highly problematic when it chooses to retain those which appear to support the cause and reject as false any which do not. 'The Company of Wolves' offers one of the clearest illustrations of this point. Carter's story brings to the surface the dimension of sexuality which (many critics have argued) lies beneath the Red Riding Hood narrative, but refuses to accept the reasoning that this is, therefore, a parable of rape. Tales of sexually voracious males preying on sexually naive females are unhelpful, Carter suggests, as they perpetuate the dynamic in which women remain helpless victims of men's (mis)behaviour. Feminist rewritings which show Red Riding Hood using her wits to escape the encounter with the wolf may challenge the notion of the heroine's weakness, but still fail to address the question of the representation of women's autonomous desire. Carter's women do not appeal to men: "Stop persecuting me!" Instead, they offer challenges: "What if *I* were predator? What if we were equals? Could you deal with *my* desire?" As I shall discuss, such strategies have drawn criticisms that, in her affirmation of female sexuality within contexts of attempted or

⁷ In refusing to offer women clear role models Carter showed herself uninterested in following any feminist party line. She also strongly criticised novels which did do this; she dismissed Marilyn French's classic *The Women's Room* as "bourgeois fiction" whose aim was "to teach people how to behave in social circles to which they think they might be able to aspire". Quoted in Gamble, Sarah (1997) *Angela Carter: Writing From the Front Line*: Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 98.

even actual violence, Carter ignores the realities of oppression and succeeds only in creating a sophisticated pornography which lends weight to a dangerous myth of female masochism.

Who is the enemy? In Carter's writing, the answer to this question is always complex. What if opposition to women's liberation can be found within a feminist counter-public sphere, as well as outside it? As I have suggested, Carter's work has not been granted feminist approval and then offered up to a wider public with the intention that it should educate or convert the uninitiated. Rather, the work offers challenges to every sphere, and women in particular are criticised by her for clinging - usually unconsciously - to deep-rooted myths of femininity which are ultimately even more damaging than those which they consciously oppose. In effect, says Carter, women conspire to maintain their position of social and sexual subordination. This does not mean that women are the source of their own oppression, but rather that processes of consciousness-raising have further layers to peel away than might at first have been supposed.

I am much less familiar with Chedid's body of work than with Carter's, so I will restrict my observations to *The Goddess Lar* without offering generalisations. This play is less provocative than Carter's, perhaps, in terms of offering a challenge to the feminist counter-public sphere; nevertheless, it similarly problematises the question of who is responsible, here for the sake of servitude in which the protagonist, Gynna, finds herself. The image the play offers us of the goddess of the hearth is deliberately blurred, through a seductive evocation of woman as eternal Mother, carer, nurturer, refuge from a world filled with conflict. Woman's position is not one of weakness, Gynna is assured, but of power - "Everything begins/Everything ends/Between our legs" (GL: 182) - yet in the context of the play's action, this promise is revealed as a consolatory nonsense of exactly the kind to which Carter objects. Chedid's protagonist comes to realise that she has been seduced by fictions of herself which have led her to accept conditions of manifest inequality; the play suggests, further, that these are fictions cherished by women as well as by men.

In asserting the power and potential impact of Chedid's and Carter's re-visionings, it is helpful to draw attention, finally, to their contexts of production and reception. The staging requirements of *The Goddess Lar*, first of all, imply a relatively small, intimate playing space. Nothing complex is demanded by way of set, costume, or technical elements. This is theatre demystified, its processes brought up close; the series of alternative endings, and the invitation to the audience to propose others, further represent theatre as (potentially, at least), a tool for creative use by the community as a whole. The play seeks to rouse spectator support for Gynna's struggle to break free from the myths which have, so far, succeeded in preventing her taking action. However, Chedid takes this challenge to traditional hierarchies of power beyond the narrative content and into staging, given that the audience are invited to participate in the performance and affect the course of the action. As I will discuss, such a strategy is open to criticism. It could be questioned how far power is really handed over to the audience, and how far the actors remain in control. It could also be pointed out that, even if apparently 'successful' in its use of participation, the production represents no more than a temporary suspension of conventional rules of actor-spectator relations; by extension, the departure from the condition of oppression under patriarchy could equally be seen as temporary. To use Richard Schechner's terms, *The Goddess Lar*, arguably, offers transportation but not transformation.⁸ On the other hand, one could take the view that the smallest positive shift in consciousness is enough to make the event worthwhile. In a paper given at the recent UK conference 'Whose Theatre is it Anyway?', Baz Kershaw drew on ecological terms to reappraise the political potency of the actor-audience relationship. Ecologists examine the 'edge phenomena' which occur, for example, where river water meets river bank, and acknowledge that micro elements passing across this edge are capable of effecting macro changes. Kershaw suggested that this could be applied to theatre; in this way, the impact of a theatrical event could be considered to extend beyond its immediate participants, especially if the border between

⁸ Schechner, Richard (1985) 'Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed': in Schechner (1985) *Between Theater and Anthropology*: Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 117-50. This issue of temporary and permanent alteration of hierarchical relationships also relates to theories of carnival, discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis.

actors and audience is deliberately stirred.⁹ Such a metaphor, whilst perhaps not unproblematic, is useful to bring to bear on the question of feminist theatre's (and feminism's) impact. Distinctions between mainstream and alternative theatres, and between a public and a private sphere, are to some degree artificial; activity produced within one context will filter through, in some form, into another.

Such questions of impact and influence are at least equally pertinent to my discussion of Carter, since the narratives I examine have been taken through a variety of adaptation processes, and recreated for diverse audiences. The film version of *The Company of Wolves* will have reached a far wider public than the radio or theatre versions, wider even, possibly, than the readership of her short story. The opportunity to communicate Carter's powerful feminist retelling to a large, popular audience seems one to seize. It is disappointing (if not altogether surprising), however, that the screen adaptation is marketed primarily on its special effects and that these become more important to the film than the meanings behind the characters' various metamorphoses. The radio versions of 'The Company of Wolves' and of 'Vampirella' are less compromised in this way, partly because Carter maintained a more authoritative role in their production than she could within the context of film making, and partly because the absence of the visual dimension evades some of the problems of censorship which might otherwise arise. Theatre stagings of Carter's texts, lastly, occupy a different place again. It is no small task for performers to enact the bizarre, seemingly perverse encounters and transformations Carter's writing demands. However, perhaps paradoxically, theatre's substitution of the body's immediacy and vulnerability for the expensive illusions of which cinema is clearly more capable render it in many ways better suited, in my view, to do justice to the author's provocative exploration of sexuality and power in human relationships.

⁹ Kershaw, Baz (1999) 'Whose performance is it anyway? Or, Oh for unruly audiences!': paper given at the UK conference 'Whose Theatre is it Anyway? Performance, Politics, Community': University of Wolverhampton, 29-31 October 1999.

“Sleep, sleep, woman-in-a-trance”: Andrée Chedid’s

The Goddess Lar, or Centuries of Women

The Goddess Lar, or Centuries of Women was written by Andrée Chedid in 1977 and first performed in translation in 1985 at the Ubu Repertory Theater in New York. The play has a cast of four characters - a wife and husband, their young son, and the family’s ‘household deity’ - plus a chorus of unspecified number. The piece primarily dramatises the struggle between the wife and the goddess as the former attempts to assert her rights as an independent individual, rebelling against the forces which have conspired to maintain her submission to the dominant order. Stylistically, the play is expressionistic. Setting and images are simple and stark. The plot is structured into a series of tableaux, each making a point of its own. Characters are clearly socially representative, rather than individualised. Dialogue is poetic, with no attempt made to echo the rhythms of daily speech. The predominant atmosphere is dreamlike - at times nightmarish - yet it is also shot through with comedy; it is this humour which earths the play and retains a sense of parody for its audience.

The striking theatrical style of *The Goddess Lar* is by no means typical of the author’s approach as a playwright. Chedid has written in many genres and her work resists categorisation within any school or movement.¹⁰ Certain themes recur, however. Christiane Makward and Judith Miller suggest that Chedid’s theatre pieces are all preoccupied with “the paradoxical power and impotence of language”¹¹, certainly an issue central to *The Goddess Lar*, as I shall discuss. This sense of language’s complexity arises partly from the variety of cultural influences to which the author has been exposed. She was born in Cairo into a Lebanese family for whom French was a second language and has lived in Paris for most of her adult life. In exploring the territory of myth within this play and elsewhere in her work, Chedid is consciously both drawing on specific cultural traditions and investigating the possibility of a shared

¹⁰ Makward & Miller eds. (1995) *op.cit.*, 167.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

language which might cut across national boundaries.¹²

The Goddess Lar represents myth as the tyrannical force of tradition which perpetuates patriarchally-dictated gender relations. Myth is given physical form, as I have suggested, in the persona of the 'Goddess Lar' (also referred to as Mattaa), an ancient deity who must be constantly attended to by the woman Gynna¹³ - "a creature in transit and of our times". (GL:172) The name 'Lar' is drawn by Chedid from the following sources:

"*Lares*: the name of the Roman gods who were thought to protect the home."

-*Le Petit Larousse*

"Household *Lares*: foremothers and protectors of the souls of the home."

-*Le Petit Robert* (GL: 171)

The American mythologist Joseph Campbell also makes reference to the lares in a discussion of Roman mythology, stressing the importance for the Romans of the cult of the family. According to Campbell the lares are the *numina* (or divine forces) of household effects. It is also of interest, as Campbell notes, that amongst the various protectors of the home the "guardian of the hearth, Vesta, was personified as a goddess, and that of the door, Janus, as a god".¹⁴ The male doorkeeper thus has the task of repelling intruders, but perhaps also that of regulating who leaves. This is very relevant for a consideration of Chedid's play, where Gynna is physically trapped within the home; as the author states, in whatever manner the play is staged

¹² Earlier works by Chedid which have used mythic sources include her novel *Nefertiti et le rêve d'Akhnaton* (Nefertiti and Akhnaton's Dream, 1974) and her plays *Bérénice d'Égypte* (Berenice of Egypt, 1962) and *Les Nombres* (The Numbers, 1965): *ibid*, 167-9.

¹³ Chedid states that the name Gynna intends to suggest resonances of the Greek *gynoecium*, the name for 'a place where women meet'; this is apt in that Gynna represents 'woman', rather than a specific and individualised character (yet not in the sense of an essential *femininity*). It is indicated also that this name is to be pronounced 'Djinna', perhaps signalling that the character has the potential for transformation, of herself and others. The names of all Chedid's characters are meaningful; Mattaa and Mann (Gynna's husband) are intended to have Germanic/Anglo-Saxon resonances, while the name of their son Chabb comes from the Arabic meaning 'adolescent' (this last stressing the importance of educating the next generation). While the implication of Mann's name is self-evident, Mattaa's might call to mind Maat (the Egyptian mother goddess), or have resonances of 'mother', or 'martyr'; all these connotations have relevance for the themes of the play. This playing with different languages by Chedid is done, as she states, "in the hope of abolishing national boundaries" (GL: 171) and while it is questionable how far this can be achieved, I do believe the play has pluricultural resonances.

¹⁴ Campbell, Joseph (1982) *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 320.

the impression must be given that Gynna moves in a restricted space from which she tries, at times, to escape. If there is no set it would be sufficient, for example, to define the strict limits of her territory by the lighting. (GL: 172)

Although it is Mattaa, a female deity who appears to keep Gynna confined to this space, it is Gynna's husband - Mann - whose name is invoked in this cause. The goddess tells her: "(As an incantation) Mann needs a kitten, a mother, a lamb. Mann wants a reflection, a bodyguard, a shelter..." (GL: 181) The Lar of Chedid's play seems to combine the functions of Vesta and Janus; she guards both the hearth and the door, and is a female figure, yet represents the 'rights' of man/Mann.¹⁵

French mythographer Fernand Comte also considers the *lares familiares*, quoting Apuleius:

Among the souls of the dead (or human souls) there are those who have been entrusted with the mission of watching over their descendants, and their peaceful and calming power held sway over the house. They were given the name *lar familiaris*.¹⁶

This, it appears, is the task of Chedid's Mattaa - but her "peaceful calming power" is called into question by the playwright. The goddess is represented rather as a robust and frequently sarcastic figure, who bullies the less self-assured Gynna into submission. When we do see her "calming" Gynna, Chedid reveals this as a form of hypnosis designed to stifle her impulse to rebel. In Tableau 4 Mattaa, backed by a recorded chorus of 'conforming women', tells Gynna:

Don't improvise
Follow our example
Let yourself be carried!
Let yourself be shaped!
(*She modulates her tone.*)
Sleep, sleep, woman sleeps.
Forever, she will sleep and sleep.

¹⁵ Lar could perhaps be viewed as a "male-identified woman", to use Sue Ellen Case's terminology. Compare what I have said of Lar with Case's discussion of Athena in *The Oresteia*. Case (1988) *Feminism and Theatre*: London, Macmillan, 14-16.

¹⁶ Apuleius, *De Deo Socratis*: quoted in Comte, Fernand (1991) *Mythology*: Edinburgh, Chambers, 123.

Chorus and MATTAA:

Your boundaries are cosy

Your boundaries are warm

Sleep, sleep, woman-in-a-trance... (GL: 182)

Using Ovid's *Fasti* as his source, Comte gives us a further dimension to the myth with the story of the nymph Lara whose tongue was torn out by Jupiter as a punishment for revealing to Juno Jupiter's designs on another nymph, Juturna. Jupiter gave the mutilated Lara to Mercury to take her down to hell; on the way Mercury raped her and as a result she gave birth to twins, the Lares.¹⁷ There is a strong irony in the idea that these 'protectors of the home' are in fact the children of rape. Patriarchal power on the one hand manifests itself through overtly violent and repressive acts, and on the other insists - through the medium of woman - upon the sanctity of family life. In one sense it appears that these two represent opposite ends of the spectrum, yet as Chedid's play shows, they are closely interrelated: the 'sanctity of the family' as presided over by Mattaa is itself a state of repression.

As stated earlier, Gynna's activities are confined to the private sphere of the home (although the context of theatrical production of course opens this world to public examination). Gynna's duty is to ensure the smooth running of the household, but in practice all her time is taken up in attendance on the goddess, the symbolic embodiment of this duty. Mattaa's shrine lies behind a *trompe-l'oeil*-painted altar; this serves to reinforce the sense of her artificiality, as do the "invisible cothurni" that increase her height and the white paint that makes her face appear "petrified". (GL: 177) Makward and Miller in the preface to the play note that Mattaa "resembles a child's version of a phantom, a mummified remnant of the West's Greco-Roman past"¹⁸; through the scenes that follow, Chedid asks the audience to consider who might have preserved her, and for what reasons.

¹⁷ Robert E. Bell recounts a similar version of the myth, but adds that as Mercury was officially the conductor of *dead* souls, his rape of 'Larunda' "came close to an act of necrophilia". Bell also emphasises the importance of speech and its loss in this myth; he describes Larunda as the nymph who "gossiped" to Juno, stating that her name relates to the Latin word for talkative. Bell (1991) *op.cit.*, 274-75.

¹⁸ Makward & Miller eds. (1995) *op.cit.*, 169-70.

Attending to the 'goddess of the hearth' is a full-time and often frantic occupation for Gynna. The demands made exhaust her mentally and physically, thereby diminishing whatever energy for resistance she might have. Her husband is entirely blind to the real circumstances of her days, adhering to the familiar myth of woman's quiet domestic domain set against man's battle with the 'real world':

MANN: Think about me for a minute; my life's a constant hassle... worries, responsibilities. It's a madhouse out there. You don't even realize it. I often envy your being here, where it's calm. (GL: 187)

The effect of these lines is ironic, since the audience have earlier received evidence starkly to the contrary.

Initially Tableau 2, entitled 'SOME SPACE', does suggest that the "calm" Mann imagines to exist, might actually be a reality. Stage directions state that Gynna takes off her apron and shoes, unfastens clothing and lets down her hair, opens the window and turns on the radio and television. These changes to her person indicate a relaxation from her domestic work, the removal of shoes and loosening of hair perhaps suggesting we are being shown something closer to a more 'natural' self. The changes to the environment signal a desire to receive contact from the outside world, to allow it to penetrate the private space of the home. Gynna's next action is to dance: at first alone, and then - if they wish to participate - with the spectators. Chedid states:

Something happy, contagious, is communicated in this spontaneous moment. Even if the radio's news interjects a tragic note, the atmosphere is gay, animated. On those evenings when the public wishes to remain seated, the play will go on with GYNNA dancing by herself. She should, however, create a feeling of complicity with the public, of intimacy with the world around her.
(GL: 176)

It is clear that here Gynna is striving to do precisely what Mattaa explicitly warns her against: she is 'improvising' and thus challenging the 'cosy' boundaries the goddess insists cannot be transgressed if order is to be maintained. (GL: 182) In this, of course, Mattaa is right. On the one hand, 'order' means harmony - on the other, tyranny. Further, this order seems akin to a religious sect; it has its own deity, and according to Mattaa, Gynna's vows are binding. Her behaviour thus challenges the established order

on all levels, most particularly in her attempt to connect with 'the public'; she is crossing the boundaries that define her sphere, both thematically and theatrically.

On this latter point, Chedid's use of audience participation - the term implying physical, as well as intellectual and emotional involvement - is of real interest. She includes the audience within the play's list of characters: "THE PUBLIC, When it wishes to participate." (GL: 171) This emphasis on volition makes it clear that the author wants to avoid manipulation of the audience for any notional 'breaking of barriers'. What is essential, in the example I've quoted, is that Gynna establishes with the audience "a feeling of complicity". (GL: 171) Clearly this cannot exist unless the audience's participation is genuine.

Nevertheless, a performance of this play would, I believe, be significantly affected on occasions when the audience do participate physically. Many practitioners have argued for the importance of crossing the actor-audience divide, for example Richard Schechner, who has stated that "[t]o encourage participation is to demand changes in the social order - radical changes."¹⁹ Similarly Augusto Boal has identified the barrier (actual or metaphorical) between stage and auditorium as the central problem in the use of theatre for social change: "all must act, all must be protagonists in the necessary transformations of society."²⁰ Such assertions do not imply that all spectators should be *made* to 'get up and join in' on a physical level, but recommend rather that they be given every chance to play a creative and critically active role in the event.

However, performers who do wish to offer an audience this opportunity have a complex task on their hands, as there are many factors which will affect decisions about whether or not to participate on a physical level. These could range - in the case of *The Goddess Lar* - from an ideological conditioning which could represent Gynna's rebellion against her domestic role in a negative light, to prior experience of theatre which makes the breaching of the convention of active performer/passive spectator unacceptable. Given such considerations, a valid position for the performers, then,

¹⁹ Schechner, Richard (1994) *Environmental Theater*: New York, Applause, 82.

²⁰ Boal, Augusto (1979) Foreword to *Theatre of the Oppressed*: London, Pluto Press, p. ii.

would be to offer the invitation to their audience whilst simultaneously respecting any resistance they encounter. However, as Schechner insists, great responsibility rests on the performers to invite participation in an appropriate manner. Amongst the guidelines he suggests are included (i) accepting random as well as prepared rhythms as artistically valid; (ii) allowing for 'open' moments when the performers do not know any more than the audience; (iii) training performers for their additional jobs as guides and hosts, and audiences in their new potential as active agents within the theatre.²¹ The participation in Chedid's play appears on the whole to adhere to Schechner's guidelines, although it is unclear whether the "training" identified under (iii) is to be carried out by any other method than trial and error.²²

However, it should be remembered that the sequence where the audience are invited to dance is, in fact, violently disrupted. Earlier in the play we have seen Gynna preparing soup which she later presents at Mattaa's altar. Now, minutes later, the dancing is interrupted as the tray - complete with flowers, glass and silverware - is hurled to the floor centre-stage. Any spectators who were dancing are asked to return to their seats. The 'meaningful' ritual of the communal dance is destroyed and attention is forced instead to a ritual which is evidently 'meaningless'; Mattaa berates Gynna:

Take it all back! I don't want it. [...] Today, the 287th day of the year: you should have added four pelican eggs and three eagle feathers exactly twenty-three minutes after the soup started to simmer. And did you make the nine signs that destroy impurities over the cauldron? I'm sure you forgot. And you know it's crucial! (GL: 177)

Mattaa's outburst represents the clamping down of authority on 'subversive' behaviour; the spectators go back to their seats, and order is reestablished once more.²³ Chedid's

²¹ Schechner (1994) *op.cit.*, 82-83.

²² It is worth considering how these guidelines by Schechner, for the development of an effective, participatory environmental theatre, might relate to the activities of the feminist counter-public sphere. Schechner is discussing strategies which, essentially, are about how communities who have traditionally perceived themselves as distinct from one another (actors and spectators) could come together meaningfully in a participatory event, in an intersection, and blurring, of spheres. In extending this concept to feminism, we might ask how a feminist theatre might communicate effectively with spectators who do not consider themselves feminist. Strategies such as allowing space for diverse views, attempting to establish genuine interaction rather than one-way communication, preparing performers additionally as 'guides and hosts', etc., seem well worth exploring.

²³ Unless, of course, the spectators refuse to go back to their seats...

purpose in introducing but suppressing participation by the public seems clear: the audience are encouraged to explore feelings of liberation, communication and contact, and when this is closed down, they should experience frustration along with Gynna.²⁴ In political terms Chedid could perhaps be criticised for cutting off the participation she has introduced, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging the ultimate power of the actors; however, if Gynna has succeeded in establishing complicity with the spectators, her attempt to bridge the private and the public will problematise a simplistic reading of where the power lies.

It should also be remembered that Mattaa puts an end to a particular form of interaction: dancing. In what ways is this significant? First, dance is an activity closely bound up with the processes of gender identification; furthermore, as Helen Thomas argues,

[d]espite the negative puritanical sexual connotations associated with dancing [...], dance history demonstrates that this was one of the few areas in public life which afforded women an opportunity for self-expression and for some limited social advancement.²⁵

It seems then that Gynna has found a channel for communication in the public sphere that is historically, if not essentially, feminine. Second, Gynna could be regarded as operating in opposition to patriarchal discourse in her use of the body, which as I have argued earlier has been associated within the dominant cultural tradition with the primitive - "the dangerous 'other' to culture".²⁶ The complex rituals of homage to Mattaa around which Gynna's days are organised are clearly a means of restriction and

²⁴ The particular relationship Chedid appears to be aiming for between actress and audience seems close to Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*, which is associated with the spontaneous and anti-structural, and with a recognition at certain moments of an 'essential human bond' that leads us temporarily to abandon the roles and categorisations put upon us by the socialising process. See Turner, Victor (1974) *The Ritual Process*: Harmondsworth, Penguin. On this issue, Franc Chamberlain notes that "[t]he types of rituals celebrated by Schechner and Turner are ones which abolish distance between performer and audience and move towards the establishment of a temporary *communitas* in which all social ties are undone. The social structure is thus acknowledged as a fiction even if its fictionality has a sacred sanction." See Chamberlain, Franc (1992) 'Embodying the Spirit: Nihilism and Spiritual Renovation in the European Theatre (1890-1914)': PhD thesis, unpublished, 197-98. *The Goddess Lar* appears to be exploring similar ideas, although its spaces for spontaneity are still controlled within the overall structure.

²⁵ Thomas, Helen (1995) *op.cit.*, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 7. My discussion of the use of dance within Churchill & Lan's *A Mouthful of Birds* in Chapter Three explores this point in more detail.

control, as are the clothes which Gynna loosens to give her body the space it needs to move.

A further, mythological association of Gynna's dancing is with the Muses, the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne/Memory who presided over the arts. (Of these, Terpsichore is most frequently associated with dance.) Barbara Walker describes the Muses as "the source of 'in-spiration', literally breathing in 'I-deas' or Goddess-spirits within."²⁷ Thus Gynna could be interpreted as drawing on her creative strength in order to combat the draining influence of Mattaa upon her energies; an application of Walker's statement further suggests that Gynna is not 'rejecting the goddess', but finding an alternative and more meaningful 'spirit' within herself, and one which is affirmed by the audience.²⁸

Despite all of these resonances, it would be an oversimplification to interpret Gynna's actions as an opting out or rejection of 'masculine' verbal discourses. At the start of the play it is true that she is relatively inarticulate, verbally; she tries to express to Mattaa what she believes to be missing from her life at present:

GYNNA: (*More and more upset*) Living... it's... how shall I put it, it's...
MATTAA: (*Parodying her*) Living, it's... Living... how shall I put it, it's...
Living? Well, what is it? You see, you have no answer! You're all
mixed up! (GL: 178)

Mattaa uses verbal weapons to persuade, confuse and humiliate Gynna, who eventually protects herself from the attack by covering her ears and telling the goddess "I want other words [...] than yours". (GL: 179) At this point comes Gynna's second attempt to make contact with the audience, but this time, she struggles to communicate verbally:

GYNNA: (*To the public, feverishly*) Something in me, in you, is thirsty. [...] Something that is groping for words... [...] (*She hesitates, then,*

²⁷ Walker (1995) *op.cit.*, 701.

²⁸ Writing of the many roles of the Muses, Nor Hall states that they are "the ones who go around collecting the scattered limbs of a dismembered body. They reassembled that which madness tears to pieces." (Hall, Nor, 1996: 'Daughters of Memory: Notes on Constructing a Mother-Daughter Autobiography': *The Open Page*, No.1, 1996: Cardiff, The Magdalena Project, 25.) In her attempt to establish contact with the audience, Gynna could be interpreted as reassembling 'the human body'; she is making an assertion of community over the separatist myths that reinforce a division of women both from men, and from each other by confining individual women to the private sphere.

quickly) Somewhere we went blind! Or maybe, we're only at the beginning. An appeal toward a multitude of other appeals. A cry that will no longer be stifled. (GL: 179-180)

As we have seen, Mattaa has another strategy to deal with Gynna: the lyrical use of words to 'sing her to sleep' (Tableau 4, referred to previously). Gynna's appeal to the audience for support is drowned out by the chant of the Chorus, in an echo of Mattaa's arguments:

Chorus
Long live the garden of delights
Long live the warrior's refuge!

Man gives himself to the universe
Woman withdraws into herself.

Man is a whirlwind
Woman a cocoon. (GL: 184)

The Chorus are champions of the *status quo*, celebrating the 'natural' differences between Man and Woman, differences which tie them respectively to the public and private spheres.²⁹ The tableau is entitled 'CENTURIES OF WOMEN'; who is Gynna, Mattaa demands, to deny the authority of tradition? Gynna sits on Mattaa's lap, appearing as if engulfed in her body (GL: 183)³⁰, revealing to the audience the gradual disappearance of the woman into the role: homemaker, goddess of the hearth. It is not woman who is the "cocoon", Chedid hints, but myth which is the web spun around her.

²⁹ Comparisons can clearly be drawn here with the female choruses of Rame's *Medea* and Wertebaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*. In each of these plays, echoing classical Greek tragedy, the female chorus's role is essentially to conform; they provide a foil against which we can judge the behaviour of the female protagonist(s). In *Medea*, the chorus remain in passive acceptance of their place as second-class citizens, so that Medea's final cry for the future to bring "A new woman!" reflects on them as well as on Medea herself. Wertebaker's chorus is rather different; the gradual recognition of Tereus' tyranny and its consequences leads them to change, slowly and painfully, to the point when they begin to demand answers to the 'difficult questions' that have previously been left unasked. See Chapters Two and Three for this discussion in full.

³⁰ It seems here that Mattaa's behaviour is 'charming' in the sense used by Bruce Wilshire, whereby the charming person "induces in one a narrowing of attention to a small range of preoccupations; the gulf of the past and the gulf of the future are masked out [...]. In this fuzzy cocoon of hypnotic or quasi-hypnotic involvement with the other, the contour of one's identity blurs into his or hers." Wilshire, Bruce (1991) *Role Playing and Identity*: Bloomington, Indiana UP, xv. At this point in the play Mattaa induces Gynna to forget her own desires and restrict herself to the 'small range' of the home. Gynna is also losing any sense of her own identity as she becomes submerged in Mattaa's, just as - Chedid seems to suggest - women may feel themselves to be defined by their role as 'homemaker'.

Chedid's stage directions indicate that in a sense it is the audience who must 'save' Gynna. Forcing herself from the goddess' lap, she runs to face the spectators, stares at them and "seeks their help as if drawing strength from their eyes". (GL: 184) The importance of the actress' success earlier in establishing complicity with the public is evident; if this failed, a plea for solidarity now will be meaningless. With renewed confidence that Mattaa's arguments are false, Gynna now challenges her directly, using both words *and* body as weapons. The goddess insists that as she and Gynna are really 'one', there is no way they can be parted; Gynna responds by challenging Mattaa to imitate her physically (we have already seen that the latter can parody Gynna's words), to give proof of this essential and necessary connection:

In the distance the strong beat of a jazz piece.
 GYNNA: Come on! It's me who's leading the dance now [...]. Stretch! Stand up! Improvise! More energy! Higher! Extend your arms! Move! Dance! Better than that! *She laughs.*
 (...Ossified in her clothes, grotesque, *THE GODDESS LAR* moves gracelessly. *She loses her breath, stumbles.*) (GL: 185)

The intensity of the dance increases. Mattaa makes "one last and colossal effort", but "gets caught up in her skirts, slips, sags, collapses in a pile of robes" (GL: 186), revealing vividly her inability to prove the truth of her words by her actions. The goddess Lar represents a myth that has been built up, dressed and painted to look duly impressive - but ultimately, it is toppled by its own weight. For a moment, Gynna is free and it is the goddess who is entrapped.

The next section of the play deals with the confrontation between Gynna and Mann, once the latter discovers that 'tradition' has been thrown out of the home. As we might expect, the news throws him into a panic:

MANN: Without Mattaa, what will happen to me?
 GYNNA: Do I frighten you that much?
 MANN: I had faith in Mattaa! Look at what you've done! [...] I'm telling you, Gynna, you'll never take my place!
 GYNNA: I don't want your place! To walk *with* you... that's what I want. (GL: 188)

It seems, in retrospect, that Mattaa's warnings were valid. "Mann wants a reflection, a

bodyguard, a shelter” (GL: 181) and cannot envisage his relationship with Gynna on other terms. I find Chedid’s representation of Mann/man interesting here; his reaction to his wife’s ‘liberation’ is not motivated so much by the wish to tyrannise, as by simple fear of the unfamiliar. Perhaps, though, the desire to control that which is frightening, because unknown, could serve as a definition of tyranny? In a note on the play, the author states that Mann is hesitant because he does not know “if he should give or refuse his hand to this unknown woman yet to be born”. (GL: 172) Mann’s predicament is here presented critically, yet not unsympathetically: if Gynna’s role changes, what will become of his own?

Tableau 7, ‘CHRONICLES OF PAST AND PRESENT’, dramatises a three-part battle between Mann, Mattaa and Gynna. Here, as elsewhere in the play, these characters’ representative status is reinforced. Chedid directs that the

three characters must give the impression of being many people. They should move about when they speak, peopling the playing area. The voices will have three distinct modalities: GYNNA’s sober, MATTAA’s exalted, MANN’s vacillating between confidence and fear. (GL: 189)

Mattaa represents the argument of centuries of tradition, the interests of the ancestors and - so she claims - those of the descendants. While she damns Gynna’s desires as selfish, at the same time we are shown that Mattaa herself has a sense of loss:

MATTAA: A thousand meals cooked,
 A million sheets mended,
 Tons of dust displaced!
 I quickly lost
 My vigorous legs, my adolescent breasts!
 But because of me the earth
 Will never be empty for you, Mann. (GL: 192-3)

While Mattaa states that she is speaking of eternal truths, Gynna’s words suggest change, alternative possibilities:

GYNNA: Suppose, my love,
 That I were neither slave nor goddess,
 Neither “all”, nor “nothing”... (GL: 191)

Initially, her words appear to have little effect. Mann resists change, and Gynna’s

stated desire to walk beside him instead of following in his footsteps brings forth a misogynistic outburst: "The man-eaters are on the rise! Help, Mattaa! Soon, they will be everywhere." (GL: 191)

As this scene concludes, Chabb enters. It is significant that the child appears at the point where the final tableau, titled 'WHERE NEXT?', begins: what is the reaction of the new (male) generation to this dilemma? This tableau is wordless - perhaps reemphasising the ultimately greater communicative power of the body over spoken language and reflecting Gynna's earlier triumph over Mattaa through dance - and dramatises five different resolutions which the audience are shown in sequence. The first resolution enacts the reinstatement of Mattaa by the two men whilst Gynna, defeated, tries in vain to transform herself into the goddess; patriarchy insists that she conform to her allotted role. The second focuses on Chabb, who attempts to repair Mattaa's altar, not for the goddess, but for a new deity: "his own god, his own myth". (GL: 194) While Chabb's father tries to resurrect the old religion, labelling the altar MATTAA, Chabb rewrites it in reverse, as AATTAM; Gynna is "perplexed" by his actions, perhaps wondering (along with the audience) whether we are to read this as a positive reinvention of the goddess, or merely as a new evil. Resolution three shows Mann reinstating Mattaa but, as a result, provoking Chabb's and Gynna's departure. The ending of the sequence shows "MATTAA and MANN [...] standing face to face. Total darkness." (GL: 194); man is left with the image of Woman he thinks he wants, but the real woman has departed with his more enlightened counterpart. In the penultimate resolution we see the three mortals striving to evict Mattaa, using all the force at their disposal; they succeed, but in the excitement of violence, "[t]hey finish by fighting amongst themselves". (GL: 194) This scene too ends in darkness. The final resolution shows Gynna bringing Mattaa back into the home, to the initial surprise of Mann. Chedid's stage directions state:

The young woman pulls MATTAA to the center of the room. There, calmly, she removes her disguises, her battered adornments, her masks. It seems as if she's helping her emerge from a cocoon. (GL: 195)

Before long, the others are assisting Gynna; there is an atmosphere of hope, and Chabb

writes on Mattaa's former altar the words "The weather is changing... tomorrow...". (GL: 195) The lights fade, then come up again to reveal that Gynna has taken the place of the goddess, recognisably herself, yet now wearing one or two of Mattaa's articles of clothing. This closing sequence is titled 'REBIRTH'.

It seems fairly clear that Chedid's sequencing of these tableaux is significant, and that the final one is offered as the most positive and hopeful of these visions of the future. Nevertheless, the playwright states that this closing section of the play offers a further opportunity for audience involvement, envisaging a possible scenario whereby spectators are invited to choose their favoured resolution or propose further alternatives. Certainly, each of the endings outlined by Chedid is provocative in itself, and taken together, they clearly imply an intention to stimulate rather than close down debate.

If Mattaa and all she stands for is reinstated by the patriarchy (and this reinstatement is further supported by the young generation of men to come) women's future is truly bleak, Chedid implies. If the younger men seek to reject the values of the old order, this appears to offer hope; but, if the ideology which supported that order is not interrogated and a new god merely substituted for the old, who is to say this will not simply bring about a new tyranny? The third tableau suggests flight as a means of escape from oppression, but the fact that Chabb accompanies his mother implies that all hope is departing; we are not permitted to leave with them, but are left in darkness with the stalemate of Mann/man and his goddess. This is a resolution of sorts, but a very bleak one: man and woman have no authentic future together. The fourth sequence seems brighter, initially; however we are quickly shown that again, the underlying issues have not been tackled, and that these humans have no values to put in Mattaa's place.³¹

In the final resolution suggested by Chedid it is Gynna who tackles the goddess by facing up to her. She does not plead with the men to cast Mattaa out, but rather takes

³¹ To take this in conjunction with my earlier consideration of Barbara Walker's notes on dancing as drawing on 'the goddess-spirits within', I feel that Chedid's play is not concerned in any simplistic way with 'ousting' the goddess; what are sought are meaningful symbols to replace those that are no longer valid.

the lead in addressing the problem; liberation is not a gift, but a process of learning. In undressing Mattaa, Gynna is learning who the goddess is, how she has been constructed, whether or not she is truly her enemy. That Gynna replaces her implies not simple usurpation, but integration, signalled by the changes in costume; some elements of the myth could be worth holding on to, as long as the whole is thoughtfully reassembled. Nonetheless, this resolution arguably remains problematic. Why does Gynna place herself 'on a pedestal' at all? Why should she retain elements of the goddess, when nothing suggests that the men are anything other than human? I would respond to this criticism by observing first that, even though this tableau is perhaps presented as the most positive of those shown, it is not offered as the solution; second, I suggest that Chedid might be drawing attention - provocatively - to the allure of myth, evident in feminist celebration of the goddess.³²

It is worth noting that in all of these resolutions, the role of Chabb has great significance; he only enters the play for this closing tableau, and speaks only through his actions. Given that he represents youth, his resistance to or compliance with the old order will crucially affect the future. Chedid appears to favour a resolution of the conflict whereby the young generation follow the lead of this "woman of our times" towards a better understanding between the sexes, but without cutting themselves off from their forefathers or foremothers. Of course, Chabb is not only youth, but male youth. In my view Chedid is suggesting that whilst women must take the lead in this process of reformation, the support of the 'new man' is necessary if the desired result is integration rather than separatism.

I will conclude by making some explicit connections between my discussion of this play and the critical model of the feminist counter-public sphere. In production, *The Goddess Lar*, like any theatre piece, exists within the public sphere; further, by virtue of its themes and its author, this is a feminist public sphere. However, while the play clearly argues for the need for women to take the lead in their own liberation, there is no indication that it is aimed at an exclusively female audience. Indeed, the interactions

³² See for example my discussion of Gadon (1991) in Chapter One.

between Gynna, Mann and Chabb demonstrate Chedid's belief in the importance of change within society as a whole; we can assume therefore that a gender-mixed audience is relevant and desirable.³³ Within this public communicative space of theatre, Chedid dramatises Gynna's 'private' world, and reveals the means by which her confinement within it is perpetuated. We see the protagonist transgress the boundaries that notionally separate actor from audience, simultaneously representing woman's rebellion against the authority that has refused her access to public life; if the audience accept Gynna's invitation to join her, they will experience, along with her, the reaffirmation of that authority's power to suppress. Chedid's play is thus constructed to demonstrate the problem of women's struggle for liberation and to involve the audience emotionally and intellectually in the debate.

Through *The Goddess Lar*, Chedid is concerned to interrogate both ideology and aesthetics. Styles which are sensual and body-centred are revealed as powerful, yet problematic. We can see, for example, that dancing proves a means by which Gynna can overcome barriers, and assert the difference between herself and the myth of herself. On the other hand, the sensual 'musical structure' of Tableau 4 is used to reinforce the seductive allure of Mattaa as a 'safe haven' for Gynna; as if in a parodic form of *écriture féminine*, Mattaa sings:

Everything begins
Everything ends
Between our legs
[...]
Plunge into the luscious breasts of women
Lose yourself in our voluptuous flesh
(GL: 182)

As Gynna is "engulfed" in the goddess' lap at this point, it is clear that everything begins and ends within the *myth* of woman. Mattaa's words celebrate the female body, as feminism has done, yet represents this position as a romantic retreat; the female body does not symbolise refuge only for men (as it has historically been regarded) but for

³³ Having said this, I believe that Chedid's work could very usefully be explored by a women-only group. Franca Rame also works with women, but I feel shares with Chedid a commitment to broad social change that would, I believe, make address to a women-only audience unacceptable as a sole strategy.

women themselves. This scene further signals the restrictions feminism places upon itself by withdrawing from critical interaction with men. Chedid's theatrical strategies within the play demonstrate, if any proof were needed, that techniques frequently associated with radicalism (and here a radical feminism) can equally be appropriated for conservative ends.

In a note on the play, Chedid states that it dramatises woman "torn between her future and her past", fighting "to break free of herself". (GL: 172) It would appear therefore that although Gynna rejects the identification of herself with Mattaa, she is still attracted by the myth. It would be naive to view the goddess as an image created by men, and forced upon women against their will. Maybe it is even the latter who are the more susceptible to its charms, as in the case of the 'chorus of conforming women'. In *The Goddess Lar*, myth is a subtle tyrant that finds many ways to justify its continuing reign. Chedid encourages the audience to align themselves with Gynna in her struggle to recognise and deal with this 'deity', in all its complexity.

Encounters with monsters:

Angela Carter's *Vampirella* and *The Company of Wolves*

The two re-visionings of myth I discuss in this section have appeared in a variety of forms and contexts. *Vampirella* was first conceived by Carter as a radio play and was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 20th July 1976. A short story based on this play and entitled 'The Lady of the House of Love' was later published in Carter's 1979 collection, *The Bloody Chamber*.³⁴ 'The Company of Wolves', on the other hand, first appeared in short story form (also included within *The Bloody Chamber*). The story was then rewritten as a radio play, first broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 1st May, 1980. A couple of years later Carter began a collaboration with writer and director Neil Jordan and a film version of the story was subsequently released by Palace Productions in 1984.³⁵ Both texts, then, have appeared in dramatic form on radio and/or film. In addition, however, both have been adapted for the theatre. I adapted the radio text of

³⁴ The references to *The Bloody Chamber* will be taken from Carter (1996) *op.cit.*.

³⁵ Jordan, Neil dir. (1984) *The Company of Wolves*: ITC Entertainment/Palace Productions.

Vampirella for live performance in 1994 and shall refer to this production within my discussion.³⁶ *The Company of Wolves* has also been staged several times, in both amateur and professional contexts, and I will draw on one particular example to examine alongside the radio and film versions. Before embarking upon an analysis of these texts in any of their manifestations, however, it will be helpful first to say something about Carter as a writer and thinker and from there to highlight certain preoccupations within her work which have a particular bearing on this study.

Angela Carter was born in 1940, read English at Bristol University in the 1960s and in subsequent decades took up a fellowship in creative writing at the University of Sheffield and, later, at the University of East Anglia. During this time she worked both as a journalist and as a writer of novels and short stories. For brief periods of her life she lived abroad, in Japan, the United States and Australia; these experiences of cultural difference are explicitly examined in some of her journalism³⁷, but their impact on much of her fiction is also clearly evident. During her lifetime and following her early death in 1992, Carter's writing received considerable critical acclaim, but remains controversial, not least (as I have suggested) amongst feminist critics.

Through three decades of writing, Carter consistently demonstrates a commitment to the exploration of gender and sexuality, to notions of identity as socially constructed and to the examination of cultural mythologies. Her intent is almost always subversive: "I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode."³⁸ From this perspective Carter can be understood, as Lorna Sage notes, as "a conscious and deliberate revisionist"³⁹; furthermore the collection of retold fairytales, *The Bloody Chamber*, where my two texts are located, is

³⁶ *Vampirella* was presented at University College Northampton (then Nene College of Higher Education) in November of 1994, with a mixed cast of staff and students.

³⁷ Carter wrote a number of essays on elements within Japanese culture - e.g. 'Tokyo Pastoral' (1970) and 'Japanese Erotica' (1978) - on America - e.g. 'That Arizona Home' (1977) - and on Australia - e.g. 'Constructing an Australia' (1987). All these are contained within Carter (1998) *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*: London, Vintage.

³⁸ Carter (1983) 'Notes from the Front Line' in Carter (1998) *op.cit.*, 37.

³⁹ Sage, Lorna ed. (1994) *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*: London, Virago, 16.

one of her most overtly revisionist projects. Familiar characters of European fairytale – Sleeping Beauty, Bluebeard, Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, Beauty and the Beast, amongst others – jostle against each other, alongside stranger supernatural creations: the Erl-King (a male woodland spirit), a snow child, a lady vampire. Carter's solutions to the classic dilemmas of fairytale are rarely predictable. In 'The Tiger's Bride', for instance, her Beauty neither transforms the Beast into handsome prince through her love for him, nor rejects him (as an assertion of feminine independence) but accepting the beast in herself, joins him:

And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur.⁴⁰

The Bloody Chamber's fantastical exploration of strategies for dealing with violence, particularly violence directed against women, makes it – for me – a powerful feminist text. I value Carter's collection for the beauty and bold clarity of its images, but even more for its acknowledgement of the complexities of human fear and desire. Working within fairytale's familiar narratives of virtuous beauties passively awaiting courtship from handsome princes, their uglier and less patient sisters defeated and castigated, or of young girls punished for their curiosity, their transgression from the approved path – what would it mean for women to assert power and self-worth? Clearly it is possible to approach this challenge in a variety of ways: one might shift the narrative emphasis from a male character to a female, adjust the terms of the tale so that a 'negative' image becomes a 'positive' one, and so on. Carter's work appeals to me, however, because her own adjustments are never superficial (a criticism which could justly be levelled at some retellings).⁴¹

In her essay 'Notes from the Front Line', Carter clearly identifies her feminist allegiance:

The women's movement has been of immense importance to me personally and

⁴⁰ Carter (1996) *op.cit.*, 169.

⁴¹ The 'Fairy Tales for Feminists' anthologies published by Attic Press, such as *Rapunzel's Revenge* (1985) and *Ride On Rapunzel* (1992) provide a wide range of re-visions, of (unsurprisingly) varying degrees of radicalism.

I would regard myself as a feminist writer, because I'm a feminist in everything else and one can't compartmentalise these things in one's life.⁴²

Nevertheless, her writing has not always found feminist favour. As Sarah Gamble notes, Carter's work has been criticised for her apparent endorsement of pornography and sometimes graphic descriptions of violence against women, aspects which have led some critics to conclude that ultimately her work perpetuates the reactionary portrayals of women it purports to challenge.⁴³ The former charge derives importantly from responses to Carter's 'Exercise in Cultural History' *The Sadeian Woman*⁴⁴, a study actually commissioned to launch the feminist press Virago.⁴⁵ The name of the Marquis de Sade (or more correctly, Sade, as he signed away his titles in 1790⁴⁶) is synonymous with sexual violence, yet Carter concludes her 'Polemical Preface' to this work by suggesting that he was no straightforward misogynist but might in fact have been putting pornography in the service of women - or at the very least, that he has allowed his edifice to be "invaded by an ideology not inimical to women".⁴⁷ She quotes Sade:

Charming sex, you will be free: just as men do, you shall enjoy all the pleasures that Nature makes your duty, do not withhold yourselves from one. Must the more divine half of mankind be kept in chains by the others? Ah, break those bonds: nature wills it.⁴⁸

Given the controversial nature of Carter's proposal here, it is unsurprising that her work comes under feminist attack. Andrea Dworkin argues that Carter's fascination with Sade's pornography as something "unnaturally marvellous" leads her to disregard

⁴² Carter (1983) 'Notes from the Front Line' in Carter (1998) *op.cit.*, 37.

⁴³ Gamble (1997) *op.cit.*, 4.

⁴⁴ Carter (1979) *op.cit.*.

⁴⁵ Although *The Sadeian Woman* was intended to launch Virago in 1977, it did not in fact appear until 1979. At the time that Carter's book was published, Virago was explicitly a 'feminist press'. More recently, however, Virago has - somewhat controversially - changed its direction; in 1995 Virago began to publish male writers as well as female and Carmen Callil, founder of Virago, suggested that feminist publishing was no longer needed and that what was needed was 'fine writing' on political ideas. For more on this debate see the chapter 'Feminist Publishing' in Eagleton, Mary (1996) *Working With Feminist Criticism*: Oxford, Blackwell.

⁴⁶ From Carter's own entry on Sade in Gilbert, Harriet ed. (1993) *The Sexual Imagination*: London, Jonathan Cape, 227.

⁴⁷ Carter (1979) *op.cit.*, 37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

the actual degradation of his female victims, whilst Susanne Kappeler accuses Carter of fatally misreading Sade, “dazzled by the offer of equal opportunities”.⁴⁹ Yet Carter’s study is an exploration, not an endorsement, of Sade. She concentrates primarily on two of his heroines: the virtuous and long-suffering Justine, and her sister Juliette, by contrast a ‘sexual terrorist’.⁵⁰ Sade’s account of the adventures of Justine represents his own idiosyncratic critique of the philosophy that virtue brings its own reward; as Carter observes,

[s]he is a good woman according to the rules for women laid down by men and her reward is rape, humiliation and incessant beatings. Her life is that of a woman martyred by the circumstances of her life as a woman.⁵¹

Carter concludes that in the Sadeian universe there are ultimately only two roles: predator and prey. Juliette represents a woman turned predator; if the only available choices are to eat or be eaten, she will devour all she can. In this way, Juliette does free herself from “some of the more crippling aspects of femininity”, but if she is a New Woman, it is nonetheless “in the mode of irony”.⁵²

It is perhaps unsurprising that in the climate of 1970s feminism, Carter’s suggestion that women are too willing to identify with the role of victim should prove distinctly unpopular.⁵³ That she should use the pornographer Sade to support her argument seems, as Sally Keenan has discussed, to add further insult to injury.⁵⁴ Carter is indeed especially critical of Justine’s ‘virtue’, seeing it not as the conscious exercise of a moral faculty but as a sentimental response to a world in which she hopes her good

⁴⁹ This debate is described more fully in Gamble (1997) *op.cit.*, 97-104.

⁵⁰ See Sade (1965), Seaver, Richard & Wainhouse, Austryn trans., *The Complete Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom and other writings*: New York, Grove Press, and (1968), Seaver, Richard & Wainhouse, Austryn trans., *Juliette*: New York, Grove Press

⁵¹ Carter (1979) *op.cit.*, 38.

⁵² *Ibid*, 79.

⁵³ Robin Ann Sheets comments that “[i]n 1978 *The Sadeian Woman* seemed isolated and idiosyncratic”; see Sheets (1991) ‘Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber”’: in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* Vol.1 No.4, 633.

⁵⁴ Keenan, Sally (1997) ‘Angela Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman*: feminism as treason’: in Bristow, Joseph & Broughton, Trev Lynn eds. (1997) *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*: London, Longman, 132-48.

behaviour will bring her some reward.⁵⁵ Justine's virtue is thus, in Carter's eyes, more dangerous even than Juliette's vice, as the former

marks the start of a kind of self-regarding female masochism, a woman with no place in the world, no status, the core of whose resistance has been eaten away by self-pity.⁵⁶

The condition of placelessness - of the outsider, the Other - is not natural to women, Carter insists, but historical. Human sexuality must likewise be read in these terms: "[f]lesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh".⁵⁷ Where Sade is valuable, she argues, is in his depiction of sexual behaviours stripped of any romanticism. This strategy both 'demystifies the flesh' and brings the act into history, permitting the reader to recognise the socioeconomic baggage brought with it. What Carter imagines in *The Sadeian Woman* is an alternative to the Sadeian dichotomy of predator and prey. Juliette is scarcely a better role model than Justine, as each is complicit in perpetuating a climate of sexual terrorism:

Justine is the thesis, Juliette the antithesis; both are without hope and neither pays heed to a future in which might lie the possibility of a synthesis of their modes of being, neither submissive nor aggressive, capable of both thought and feeling.⁵⁸

It is precisely this "possibility of a synthesis", here debated polemically, which Carter also explores fictionally through the stories in *The Bloody Chamber*.

(i) *Vampirella*

Written shortly after *Vampirella* was broadcast, the perhaps better-known short story 'The Lady of the House of Love' combines an exploration of vampire mythology with a re-visioning of the Sleeping Beauty fairytale. The Countess, "beautiful queen of the vampires"⁵⁹, lives in solitude in her ancestral home, feeding from time-to-time off the local male peasantry. She is a reluctant vampire, existing in an agony of loneliness; she

⁵⁵ Carter (1979) *op.cit.*, 54.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 57.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 79.

⁵⁹ Carter (1996) *op.cit.*, 93.

longs for real, human love, but is a victim of her predatory nature. She repeatedly plays out the same pattern, for she is “a cave full of echoes, [...] a closed circuit”⁶⁰ - and it is the interruption of this circuit that finishes her. A handsome young Englishman on a bicycle tour arrives at the castle. When entertaining him, she pricks her finger on a shard from a broken glass, a twist on the Sleeping Beauty motif; applying “the innocent remedies of the nursery”⁶¹ the young man kisses her finger better, drinks *her* blood, thus bringing about an exorcism. However, the Countess cannot bear the pain of becoming human; she is released from her curse, but to death. The story concludes with the young man’s departure from the castle in the bright light of morning, to join his regiment and later die in France, “a war that was more hideous by far than any of our fearful superstitious imaginings”.⁶²

The radio play *Vampirella* carries the same themes and plot line as the short story but includes a number of additional characters and also differs significantly in tone. One major change is that whilst the Countess in the story is surrounded only by the portraits of unspecified “demented and atrocious ancestors”⁶³, *Vampirella* brings these vividly to life; we are thus encouraged to read the Countess’ behaviour explicitly within the framework of her heritage. The first of these ancestors to whom we are introduced is Sawney Beane, a Scottish peasant turned outlaw and cannibal. He explains:

Times was hard, sheep dying in the field for drought, the landlords grasping, bleeding us white wi’ taxes [...]. We poor folk dying for lack of a crust, ditches crammed with the corpses of the poor. (CR: 13)

Here it seems that the gentry are practising a form of economic vampirism, draining the energies of the people. In their desperation, the Beanes vow to reverse the situation:

So I says to my Jeannie, the outlaw’s life for us! And she says, aye, Sawney, let’s eat them up the way they’ve eaten us. (CR: 13)

As in *The Sadeian Woman*, we are presented with a climate of terrorism in which only

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶² Carter also describes the young man as a “hero out of the *Boys’ Own Paper* circa 1914”. In Carter (1997) *op.cit.*, 499.

⁶³ Carter (1996) *op.cit.*, 93.

two courses of action seem available: eat or be eaten.

The second ancestor is Elizabeth Báthory, a Hungarian aristocrat of the seventeenth century who allegedly bathed in the blood of virgin girls to maintain her youth and beauty. Like the vampire Countess, she needs the lives of others to “sustain this physical show, my self”. [CR: 27] Her value, as a woman, depends on the preservation of her appearance. She must have blood - but getting it depends on the complicity of the servants who bring her victims to her. Carter suggests they had the potential to combat this tyranny, had they overcome their fear and awe: “If they had ceased to be afraid of me, I would have ceased immediately to be beautiful”. [CR: 23] The possibility of breaking the stranglehold exists, but to do so requires a change of consciousness.

The third ancestor is the French necrophiliac, Henri Blot.⁶⁴ On trial for his sexual perversities, he assures the court that in fact the dead female body represents the “last word in conjugal bliss”:

Corpses don't nag and never want new dresses [...]. They never want to come themselves, nor demand of a man any of those beastly sophistications - blowing in the ears, nibbling at the nipples, tickling of the clit - that are so onerous to a man of passion. (CR: 24)

Blot represents his ‘unnatural desires’ to the courtroom as ultimately no different from those of the average bourgeois husband who “furiously mounts” his wife’s body, a body drained of all fleshly significance. This perception of sexual relations is clearly based on principles of power and domination and again relates to the predator-prey dichotomy examined in *The Sadeian Woman*. All of these ‘ancestors’ - Beane, Báthory and Blot - are historical figures, even if they have to some extent become culturally mythologised⁶⁵ ; by incorporating them into her vampire play Carter reiterates her argument that “[f]lesh comes to us out of history”⁶⁶ , and simultaneously presents

⁶⁴ In our staging of *Vampirella*, the role of Blot was played by an actress (of somewhat androgynous appearance); this lent a critical distance to the portrayal of a character who frequently seems viciously misogynistic. This was the only piece of cross-gender casting in the production.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Báthory’s history, for example, is appropriated by Hammer Horror in the (1970) film *Countess Dracula* (dir. Peter Sasby).

⁶⁶ Carter (1979) *op.cit.*, 11.

vampirism as a metaphor for a range of predatory behaviours.

Much has been written about the mythic figure of the vampire, not least in recent years⁶⁷ - certainly far more than can be summarised here. However, it is helpful to touch on a few issues relating to the myth (or myths, as there is no consensus as to the nature of the beast) which may assist an understanding of Carter's re-visioning. To begin with, the vampire can be read as a horrific embodiment of Western's society's 'irrational' attitudes towards sex and death, and as a reflection of certain cultural taboos. A fear of death, and of dead bodies, is widely shared across cultures. In some contexts it is believed that the living must find ways to placate the dead, because they are gone while we remain here. In some traditions precious objects are buried with corpses; in others, flowers are offered. These could be thought of as bribes to the dead, to stay in their graves and let us live in peace. However, flowers are also traditionally given by men to women; perhaps this could similarly be seen as a bribe to encourage us to stay in our places - even when we suspect we are being buried alive? (As I have noted, Henri Blot recommends the dead woman as a tractable and undemanding sexual partner.⁶⁸)

It is the vampire's sexual aggressiveness, as well as its transgression of the boundary between life and death, which makes it one of the most fascinating of monsters (for its victims and analysts alike, if the two can be separated). The attack is in the form of a kiss - a bite - a penetration; the sexual threat vampires embody is multiply transgressive, as Anne Koenen notes, because it is not heterosexual (vampires bite regardless of the gender of their victims), not linked to human reproduction (vampires do not become pregnant, but reproduce by biting), and not monogamous.⁶⁹ Aggressive female vampires, then, might be considered as even further violations of the norm as

⁶⁷ See for example Toufic, Jalal (1993) *(Vampires)*: New York, Station Hill; Gelder, Ken (1994) *Reading the Vampire*: London, Routledge; Auerbach, Nina (1995) *Our Vampires, Ourselves*: Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

⁶⁸ On a similar note, in 'Through a Text Backwards: The Resurrection of the House of Usher' (1988), Carter comments dryly on Edgar Allan Poe's "enthusiasm for dead and dying women", suggesting that Poe's essay 'The Philosophy of Composition' "should, [...] by rights, be retitled: 'The Philosophy of Decomposition'." See Carter (1998) *op.cit.*, 487.

⁶⁹ Koenen, Anne (1996) 'Vampire of the Senses: The Feminist Fantastic of Angela Carter': in *Anglistik und Englischunterricht* No.59, 151.

they challenge conventional notions of femininity by asserting the existence and power of female sexual passion. A well-known passage from Bram Stoker's classic novel *Dracula* (1897) describes the hero Jonathan Harker 'transfixed' by the allure of the three voracious vampire brides who inhabit Dracula's castle:

All three had brilliant white teeth, that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips.⁷⁰

The immense popularity of *Dracula* can in part be attributed to this bold representation of the forbidden desires (of both sexes) which break through Victorianism's repressive structures. The counterpart to the 'angel in the house' is woman as demon; the very existence of the latter is a threat, but more horrifying still is the possibility, which Stoker explores through the narratives of Mina and Lucy, that angels might be seduced into *becoming* demons.⁷¹

However, although the image of the female vampire may challenge notions of women as sexually passive, it could be seen to conform relatively straightforwardly to another stereotype of femininity: the *femme fatale* - or vamp. As Carter has observed elsewhere, this is "the woman who takes by force the blood and life and potency of a man".⁷² Given a choice between vamp(ire) or victim, the former role might well seem preferable; like Shuttle and Redgrove, we might compare the virtuous heroines of vampire films - "chlorotic weak creatures with vapours" - unfavourably with their reborn, undead selves:

[W]hat creatures they became! The corsets were replaced by practical white unhampering shrouds [...]. Their eyes shone, their gait was swift and vigorous, they spoke energy with every glance, and their smiles, full of bright teeth with handsome canines, like neat panthers, were flashing and free [...].⁷³

⁷⁰ Stoker, Bram (1993) *Dracula*: Ware, Wordsworth, 40.

⁷¹ For a detailed study of this theme, see Auerbach, Nina (1982) *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*: Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP.

⁷² Carter (1988) 'Through a Text Backwards: The Resurrection of the House of Usher': in Carter (1998) *op.cit.*, 489.

⁷³ Shuttle, Penelope & Redgrove, Peter (1978) *The Wise Wound*: New York, Grove Press, 253.

Nevertheless, whether ultimately vanquished or representative of a continuing threat, in the majority of cases these female vampires still remain trapped in the dynamic of predator/prey: this image may be of Juliette rather than Justine, but as I have discussed - following Carter's argument - the roles are equally limiting.

In both *Vampirella* and 'The Lady of the House of Love' the Countess is, as I have suggested, a reluctant vampire⁷⁴; she may be powerful, but in no way is she represented by Carter as a celebratory figure. Predator as she is, the Countess is nonetheless represented on another level as a victim within a patriarchal plot. Her entrapment within perpetuating cycles of violence is expressed through her relationship to her father; through the medium of his daughter, 'the Count' continues to project his own "modest, posthumous existence". (CR: 4) A central theme within *Vampirella* is that of inheritance: not merely the ghostly presence of her father, but also the spirits of her supposed ancestors Beane, Báthory and Blot, suggest the weight and extent of the Countess' bloodsucking lineage. When she mourns for her victims and for herself the housekeeper Mrs Beane urges her not to give way to self-pity, saying: "[Y]ou are the way you are, a necessary creature of nature, and that's an end to it." (CR: 16) Yet here again, Carter frames "nature" historically; the Countess' predicament is contextualised by representing it as the continuance of a long - and aristocratic - tradition of predatory behaviour. The challenge to the established order is signalled in the question asked by the Countess as a child about her caged skylark, and later repeated by herself as an adult: "Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?" (CR: 16) Clearly this question potentially operates on many levels; for the specifics of this study, I might ask: can the patterns of a myth be broken?

⁷⁴ The title *Vampirella* is a reference to the American "horrorzine superheroine", with whom Carter was familiar: "Vampirella, [...] in her scarlet single garment ingeniously cut to conceal her nipples whilst sumptuously exposing her navel, with her long black hair, her bat-shaped earrings and her fangs [...]. Yet she has a certain innocence; no damned undead she, but an extra-terrestrial from the planet Draculon, where blood's the natural diet and that means her tastes are not dictated by perversity but by physiology. So, according to the rather complicated ethics of the horrorzines, she is on the side of good versus evil, on the whole." Carter (1975) 'The Art of Horrorzines': in Carter (1998) *op.cit.*, 447. Clearly *Vampirella* cannot be paralleled with Carter's Countess, but they are linked in their reluctance to prey on human beings; however the cartoon character is fortunate enough to have access to a "special serum" which satisfies her need for blood. See Marigny, Jean (1993) *Vampires: The World of the Undead*: London, Thames & Hudson, 95.

In the case of the radio version, the dynamics of control and resistance I describe are expressed not simply through the words spoken but also through special effects, tonal qualities, rhythm, and the sense conveyed of proximity and distance. In adapting this text for performance, it seemed important, therefore, to find further theatrical means to express this theme. The organisation of the stage space⁷⁵, the movements of the actors within it, the use of echoed physical gestures and speech patterns⁷⁶, the effects of lighting and sound, were all designed to reinforce the sense of the subtle workings of patriarchal power⁷⁷ and to highlight those moments when the Countess sought to challenge the inevitability of her destiny. Thematically, the staging choices were intended to complicate a reading of the Countess' behaviour as instinctual; rather, it is suggested, she is caught in a myth of how she must act. Stylistically, the effects produced were both 'magical' and unsettling (for the two need not go together), hinting at mental and physical possession, and thus necessarily destabilising characters and identities. This sense of instability was heightened by the particular qualities of the text which, drawn as it was from the radio script, still contained strong elements of narration; thus characters frequently delivered direct speech, followed or preceded by narrative comment which in content or tone would complicate or even contradict their overt behaviour. At different points this device lent irony, humour, or pathos.

⁷⁵ The production took place in a black box studio, with four raised seating areas, set at angles across the corners of the room, establishing a central playing space plus 'entrances' between each pair of blocks. Black curtains hung around the walls on all sides, providing offstage space and creating the potential for an actor to move around the edge of the studio out of sight and reenter from an unexpected direction.

⁷⁶ Physical devices were adopted to reveal in theatrical terms the Countess' domination by her father, most crucially in relation to the act of vampirism itself. In the radio text, action is frequently described, for instance at the moment when the Hero first recognises the danger his hostess represents: "Like a great, white bird, the girl swooped upon me, she, the Countess, you white nightbird, you white butcherbird, spreading your wings, your muslin sails." (CR: 19) This moment was physicalised rather than narrated; the Countess swept up her arms before pouncing, but behind her in half-light could be seen the Count mirroring the action, his taller figure effectively suggesting the metaphor of puppeteer and puppet. This theme was developed further, later in the performance, in a form of ventriloquism; the Countess moves her lips as if speaking, but it is the Count's voice we hear.

⁷⁷ The Count was possibly the most difficult character to transfer from radio to stage, as in the former medium he is frequently no more than a ghostly chuckle; periodically he comments ironically on the action, but from a position which is, in a sense, 'out of time'. To convey this, the actor moved primarily around the edges of the space, usually behind the audience. The low light and the staging arrangements made him frequently more-or-less invisible: a shadow, a whisper or a ripple of the curtain signalled his passing. This elusive quality seemed a fitting expression for the operations of patriarchal power within the play: this is not an edifice which is clearly visible and thus open to attack, but an ideological oppression which penetrates every corner.

Carter's writing as a whole derives from a feminist perspective which seeks to challenge both ideology and aesthetics. In adapting *Vampirella* the intention was to develop a performance style which would retain that challenge within the medium of theatre. Whilst like Felski I am disinclined to assert that any style is 'feminist' as such (for form cannot be divorced from content), we did adopt strategies which have been identified elsewhere as concurrent with the taxonomy of a feminine performance language.⁷⁸ For example, the structure was non-linear and the style anti-realist, thus blurring identities, past and present, reality and illusion. This seems appropriate given the supernaturalistic/fantastic content, but additionally, the use of a text designed for radio assisted us in creating a somewhat fragmented textural quality. Carter has noted that radio as a medium "always leaves that magical and enigmatic margin, that space of the invisible, which must be filled in by the imagination of the listener". (CR: 497) In transferring text to stage our approach was deliberately inconsistent; for instance, some props were physically present whilst others were indicated through mime, there one moment and gone the next. Shifts in the narrative which can be easily accomplished on radio can, however, present problems for bodies in the theatre space; the performers' task became significantly one of confronting these "ruptures, blank spaces and holes"⁷⁹ creatively and seeking imaginative solutions, and indeed for the most part we embraced the disjointed, dreamlike structure as a strongly positive feature. It was not so much individual characters as the tone of the piece of the whole which was 'fantastic'; any simple opposition between fantasy and reality was thus deliberately avoided, for to have established one would ultimately have emphasised safety over subversion.⁸⁰

Gina Wisker has argued that fantasy "hollows out the real world and shows it is a tenuous construct"⁸¹, and *Vampirella* provides an interesting illustration in support of

⁷⁸ See Rapi, Nina (1991) 'Speaking in tongues but in whose language? In search of a female aesthetics': in Robson, Cheryl ed. (1991) *Female Voices, Fighting Lives*: London, Aurora Metro, 29-35.

⁷⁹ Julia Kristeva, quoted in Robson (1991) *op.cit.*, 32.

⁸⁰ This issue is also raised by Gerardine Meaney in a discussion of Carter's fiction. See Meaney (1993) *(Un)Like Subjects: Women, Theory, Fiction*: London, Routledge, 85.

⁸¹ Wisker, Gina (1997) 'Revenge of the living doll: Angela Carter's horror writing': in Bristow & Broughton eds. (1997) *op.cit.*, 119.

this theme. What might seem at first to be a representation of the confrontation of the real/rational world (embodied by the Hero) with irrational myth (the lonely lady vampire) is later complicated and subverted. When the young man innocently and willingly kisses the vampire, she appears to die; his lack of imagination has protected him from falling prey to irrational fears. The Countess' death means the death of her father also, as she was the medium through which his own existence was projected; in our production the Count found himself drawn for the first time into the centre of the playing space, weakened and at last exposed to the light - and to the sight of all. However, the play's final image minutes later shows the Hero dying amidst the carnage of the battlefield and the Count rising, vulture-like, above it: "Everywhere, I am struck down; everywhere, I celebrate my perennial resurrection." (CR: 32) Without undermining the realities of war (indeed, of this specific war), Carter blurs the boundary lines between the world we know and the shadow of superstitious fantasy, and between the rational and the irrational. Myths of death, blood and passion are woven into the fabric of society, into the institution of war, the choice of the democratic and civilised.

Vampirella, like Carter's other re-visionings, offers no reassuringly positive messages. Its central character is a sympathetic yet still horrifying creation: a predator, consumed with self-loathing, she cannot be celebrated as an image of feminine power. Furthermore, she chooses death willingly, in order to find release from her entrapment within an oppressive myth of victimisation, perpetual hunger, perfect beauty and eternal loneliness. How is this notion of self-sacrifice to be understood in feminist terms? For myself, both as author of this study and as director of the play in performance, I found it necessary to relinquish to some degree my desire to see 'positive' female characters making admirable and inspirational choices. The heroine dies; the hero dies; the tyrant is reborn. Nevertheless, this heroine does at least act out of choice. She is responsible for her own death - and once a corpse, looks "far older, less beautiful and so, for the first time, fully human" (CR: 31); the monster has been humanised, and thus also demystified. A further note of hope is introduced, on a symbolic level: the Countess dies as a vampire, but her pet skylark escapes from its cage. Whilst the last lines of the play (quoted above) are the Count's, the last experience of the production was the

sound of birdsong. Gently the audience is invited to recall the Countess' question: "Can a bird sing only the song it knows, or can it learn a new song?" *Vampirella* suggests that new songs are possible, even if brief and hesitant, and at a cost.

(ii) *The Company of Wolves*

Sexuality, stripped of the idea of free exchange, is not in any way humane; it is nothing but pure cruelty. Carnal knowledge is the infernal knowledge of the flesh as meat.⁸²

In 'The Company of Wolves', Carter takes the well-known fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood and turns it on its head, allowing it be infiltrated by another monster of superstition and folklore: the werewolf. This fairytale is one which has undergone many revisions, as collators of the genre have been quick to point out. Jack Zipes' critical anthology *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, for example, brings together thirty-eight versions from all over the world.⁸³ Two particularly familiar tellings within Western culture are those of Charles Perrault (seventeenth century) and the Brothers Grimm (nineteenth century). Zipes notes key features of each version, demonstrating that in each case the narrative was rewritten in ways which can be seen to reflect the ideologies of the period. It is Perrault, he suggests, who first introduces the motif of the red cap (the French title is 'Le Petit Chaperon Rouge'); he represents the little girl as "spoiled, negligent and naive"⁸⁴; finally, her fate - like her grandmother's - is to be devoured by the wolf. Perrault concludes with the moral that children, "especially young girls" are wrong to listen to "just anyone" and that if they do "it's not at all strange if a wolf ends up eating them".⁸⁵ In 1812 the Brothers Grimm published their version of the tale, 'Little Red Cap', now a classic. The major difference here is in the ending. Both grandmother and child are eaten, but a passing huntsman cuts open the belly of the sleeping wolf and releases both of them, still alive;

⁸² Carter (1979) *op.cit.*, 141.

⁸³ Zipes, Jack ed. (1993) *The Trials & Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*: New York & London, Routledge.

⁸⁴ Zipes, Jack (1986) 'A Second Gaze at Little Red Riding Hood's Trials and Tribulations': in Zipes, Jack ed. (1986) *Don't Bet On the Prince*: Aldershot, Gower, 230.

⁸⁵ Perrault, Charles (1697) 'Little Red Riding Hood', in Tatar, Maria trans. & ed. (1999) *The Classic Fairy Tales*: New York, Norton, 13.

the beast meets a sticky end, and Little Red Cap has learned her lesson: “Never again will you stray from the path and go into the woods, when your mother has forbidden it.”⁸⁶

The versions of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm are both familiar today. Of the two, the latter, with its ‘happy ending’, dominates. However, a much earlier telling exists, as both Zipes and Maria Tatar note. ‘The Story of Grandmother’, Zipes suggests, dates from the late Middle Ages as an oral tale. This narrative differs in several respects from both Perrault and Grimm, but it is clearly an early version of the same tale type. On the way to visit her grandmother, a girl encounters a werewolf. He gets to the cottage before she does, kills the old woman and puts some of her meat in the cupboard and a bottle of her blood on the shelf. When the girl arrives, she consumes some of both; she is then about to be killed in her turn, but tricks the wolf by going outside, on the pretext that she needs to relieve herself, and escaping to safety.⁸⁷

‘The Story of Grandmother’ is a comic and sometimes crude tale of a peasant girl who learns to cope with the world around her, through her own wit and cunning. By contrast, Perrault’s central character – dressed symbolically in red – attracts trouble by her naivety, is unable to save herself, and is punished by death; the Brothers Grimm rescue her, but through the medium of a strong male figure who polices the forest. The shock element of the girl devouring her grandmother’s flesh and blood, the scatological humour – both are absent from these moralistic revisions. As Tatar comments, what was once “a folktale full of earthy humour and high melodrama [...] was transformed into a heavy-handed narrative with a pedagogical agenda designed by adults”.⁸⁸ In ‘The Company of Wolves’ Angela Carter offers a contemporary version, which in my view successfully reinvigorates this well-worn story.

With ‘The Company of Wolves’, Carter restores to the Little Red Riding Hood narrative several features evident in the earlier oral version. Her heroine is a peasant,

⁸⁶ Brothers Grimm (1812) ‘Little Red Cap’, in Tatar trans. & ed. (1999) *op.cit.*, 16.

⁸⁷ ‘The Story of Grandmother’ is told in full in Zipes ed. (1986) *op.cit.*, 228-29.

⁸⁸ Tatar ed. (1999) *op.cit.*, 6.

not the bourgeois little girl of Perrault and the Grimms. As in 'The Story of Grandmother', the encounter is with the werewolf, a hybrid creature; as Laura Mulvey observes, this shift contributes "a more explicitly sexual theme that is only implicitly present in the moralising versions of the tale".⁸⁹ Most importantly of all, Carter's peasant girl is able to save herself from becoming the werewolf's prey, but in controversial terms: she removes her clothes and embraces the beast, her own appetite matching his, as they join together as equals. In the discussion which follows I will examine how fairytale and folklore are intertwined and rewritten within Carter's tale, the implications of the final resolution, and the effectiveness of three dramatic adaptations: the radio play, Neil Jordan's film version, and a student-devised performance.

In re-visioning the Red Riding Hood narrative - and indeed, in writing all the stories of *The Bloody Chamber* - Carter sees herself not so much disrupting a cultural establishment as taking her place within an ongoing tradition. She describes the fairytale as an "orally transmitted narrative with a relaxed attitude to the reality principle and plots constantly refurbished in the telling", from its inception put together

out of all sorts of bits of other stories long ago and far away, [a form that was] tinkered with, had bits added to it, lost other bits, got mixed up with other stories, until our informant herself has tailored the story personally [...] to suit herself.⁹⁰

Carter, like Marina Warner, identifies the teller as female: she is the gossip, the creative passer-on of the 'old wives' tale'.⁹¹ Feminist re-visioning of fairytales consciously embraces this history, recognising that women have always played a key role in the transmission of popular narratives; 'classic' versions which may have achieved a mythicised cultural status through the male-dominated literary tradition are thus no more authentic than any other.

⁸⁹ Mulvey, Laura (1994) 'Cinema Magic and Old Monsters': in Sage ed. (1994) *op.cit.*, 240.

⁹⁰ Carter, quoted in Lappas, Catherine (1996) ' "Seeing is believing, but touching is the truth": Female Spectatorship and Sexuality in *The Company of Wolves*': in *Women's Studies* (1996) Vol.25, 124-5.

⁹¹ See Warner (1994) *op.cit.*, 12-26.

I have noted that in 'The Company of Wolves', Carter incorporates many elements from the early oral tale within her narrative, and in doing so, challenges the authority of better-known versions. However, Carter's strategy is not a straightforward rejection of the latter, but a complex and subtle critique. To experience her story, whether as literature or in any of its dramatic forms, is to encounter a dual narrative. The familiar is encoded within the unfamiliar; our attention is drawn to those moments when this new tale steps off the path, most crucially when the protagonist makes alternative choices. This is illustrated in Carter's twist on the fairytale's ritualised language, here at the crucial moment when the girl fully recognises her danger:

What big teeth you have!
She saw how his jaw began to slaver and the room was full of the clamour of the forest's *Liebestod* but the wise child never flinched, even as he answered:
All the better to eat you with.
The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat.⁹²

She laughs, knowing the old script; hers, however, runs differently.

Carter brings her Red Riding Hood face to face with no Disney-style talking animal, but with the werewolf, accomplice of the devil.⁹³ The werewolf is evidence of the narrative observation that "the wolf may be more than he seems"⁹⁴ ; a wild beast may have a human heart, and a handsome huntsman a voracious animal appetite. In his transgression of boundaries and categories, the werewolf threatens to bring the forest into the kitchen.⁹⁵ There can be no doubt that he also embodies sexual danger:

Before he can become a wolf, the lycanthrope strips stark naked. If you spy a naked man among the pines, you must run as if the Devil were after you".⁹⁶

The werewolf's hunger for flesh thus has a double meaning.

However, Red Riding Hood too may be more than *she* seems. Carter's heroine is not a

⁹² In Carter (1996) *op.cit.*, 219.

⁹³ Zipes, in Zipes ed. (1986) *op.cit.*, 244.

⁹⁴ In Carter (1996) *op.cit.*, 213.

⁹⁵ "The sticks in the hearth shift and hiss; night and the forest has come into the kitchen with darkness tangled in its hair." *Ibid*, 216.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 214.

little girl, but an adolescent who has just reached sexual maturity: “[h]er breasts have just begun to swell [...] and she has just started her woman’s bleeding”.⁹⁷ She is a virgin still, but is sexually aware; she dawdles in the forest, not to pick flowers, but to ensure that she loses the wager and will therefore owe the dashing huntsman a kiss. Through these revisions, and through the reintroduction to the tale of the physically ambiguous werewolf figure, Carter makes explicit the sexual connotations which are only implied by Perrault and the Grimms, but are nevertheless sufficiently present to support feminist critic Susan Brownmiller’s reading of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ as a parable of rape.⁹⁸

In running towards rather than away from the beast at the moment of confrontation, the girl signals that she is “nobody’s meat” but instead a willing partner in this sexual encounter. She has removed her red shawl, “the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses”⁹⁹, and with it discarded the role of sacrificial victim. In the terms of *The Sadeian Woman* she is, as Maggie Anwell comments, “neither Justine, martyred by passive acceptance of her fate, nor Juliet, equating sexuality with violence”.¹⁰⁰ Because this Beauty desires the Beast, she restores humanity to the encounter, for as Carter has argued, “[s]exuality, stripped of the idea of free exchange, is not in any way humane; it is nothing but pure cruelty”.¹⁰¹ By her actions the protagonist asserts herself as flesh, not meat. The story leaves us with a final image of successful negotiation: “See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny’s bed, between the paws of the tender wolf.”¹⁰²

It is perhaps unsurprising that elements of Carter’s story have attracted considerable criticism. Patricia Duncker, for example, sees the tale’s ending as upholding the values of a deeply sexist psychology:

Red Riding Hood sees that rape is inevitable [...] and decides to strip off, lie

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 215.

⁹⁸ Brownmiller, quoted in Zipes ed. (1986) *op.cit.*, 232.

⁹⁹ Carter (1996) *op.cit.*, 219.

¹⁰⁰ Anwell, Maggie (1988): ‘Lolita Meets the Werewolf: *The Company of Wolves*’: in Gamman, Lorraine & Marshment, Margaret eds. (1988) *The Female Gaze*: London, The Women’s Press, 81.

¹⁰¹ Carter (1979) *op.cit.*, 141.

¹⁰² Carter (1996) *op.cit.*, 220.

back and enjoy it. She wants it really. They all do. The message spelt out.¹⁰³

If this *were* the moral of the story, Duncker would be right to be concerned. However, I would argue that such an interpretation rests on the assumption that the heroine cannot actively desire the seducer in her turn, as to do so would be perverse. Yet to deny that women might choose to be perverse, might be attracted to and capable of violence, is to retain the stereotype of women's innocence and passivity, an image "only slightly less constricted than the Victorian angel in the house".¹⁰⁴ This is difficult territory, a controversial voice even within the counter-public sphere of feminist criticism, and I suggest that responses to the story's conclusion will depend crucially on how a reader - or audience member - perceives the protagonist in the preceding sections.

As I have indicated, I believe that Carter goes to considerable lengths within the short story to draw attention to her heroine as a sexual being, not a flower ripe for the plucking, but with an active curiosity of her own. She eagerly anticipates her second meeting with the huntsman; when she realises that he views her as his victim she laughs, and challenges him to match his appetite to her own.¹⁰⁵ I do not overlook the fact that she is afraid of him, which the story makes clear, but I would suggest that fear is not inconsistent with the anticipation of a first experience of sexual intercourse; she shivers at the thought of "the blood she must spill"¹⁰⁶, yet this is not to be her lifeblood. In my view, Carter represents her protagonist as both desiring and,

¹⁰³ Duncker (1984) 'Re-imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers': in *Literature and History* (1984) Vol.10 No.1, 7.

¹⁰⁴ Merja Makinen, quoted in Day, Aidan (1998) *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*: Manchester, Manchester University Press, 150.

¹⁰⁵ Margaret Atwood comments on Carter's conclusion: "A consolatory nonsense, perhaps - don't try this technique on a street mugger - but at least a different consolatory nonsense, one that tries for a kind of synthesis Carter suggested in *The Sadeian Woman*: 'neither submissive nor aggressive'." Atwood (1994) 'Running With the Tigers': in Sage ed. (1994) *op.cit.*, 130.

¹⁰⁶ Carter (1996) *op.cit.*, 218.

ultimately, able to deal with the consequences of her desire¹⁰⁷ : this is not a rape which she is 'asking for' but a transgressive encounter carefully negotiated, from which she emerges "sweet and sound", her partner "tender".¹⁰⁸ It is a challenging tale; I will turn now to consider how effectively this challenge has been met by three different dramatic adaptations.

Carter's radio adaptation of 'The Company of Wolves' in many ways remains fairly close to the original. The plotting is somewhat altered, but the events and the final confrontation remain true to the spirit of the source. The medium seems well-suited to express the narrative's ambiguities, for as Carter has observed "the absence of the visual image [means that] radio drama need not necessarily be confined to the representation of things as they are". (CR: 498) This is a crucial factor in the representation of the werewolf himself. Vocal effects are used to reveal this creature as simultaneously both human and animal: "My howl deranges the soo-oul" (CR: 62). Such techniques support Carter's provocation that the two might not be so far apart, that 'bestiality' might in fact be latent within human beings.

In the representation of the heroine, also, Carter maintains a degree of ambiguity. Although referred to by Granny repeatedly as a little girl (CR: 61, 63 & 64) she sees herself somewhat differently, "not such a little girl, for all that you baby me" (CR: 64). The experience of hearing the audio version rather than simply reading the script is important here; the actress' voice is youthful but clearly that of an adult, her tone 'knowing' throughout. The effect produced is heavily ironic, for instance in the scene when girl and huntsman flirt in the forest: "And me all of a flutter, poor simple young girl that I am." (CR: 75) In the final confrontation, this heroine is more assertive even

¹⁰⁷ In asserting her heroine's maturity, Carter challenges the famous critic Bruno Bettelheim's interpretation of the Red Riding Hood narrative. Bettelheim writes: "Little Red Cap's danger is her budding sexuality, for which she is not yet emotionally mature enough. The person who is psychologically ready to have sexual experiences can master them, and grow because of it. But a premature sexuality is a regressive experience, arousing all that is primitive within us and that threatens to swallow us up. [...] In directing the wolf to Grandmother, [Little Red Cap] acts as if she were telling the wolf, 'Leave me alone; go to Grandmother, who is a mature woman; she should be able to cope with what you represent; I am not.'" Bettelheim, Bruno (1979) *The Uses of Enchantment*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 173-4.

¹⁰⁸ Carter (1996) *op.cit.*, 220.

than in the story:

RED RIDING HOOD: I do believe, since you got here before me, that you owe me a kiss.

What big teeth you have!

WEREWOLF: (*Choking - grabbing at straws.*) All the better... to eat you with.

RED RIDING HOOD: Oh, I say!

She goes into peals of laughter.

Well, each to his meat, but I am meat for no man! (CR: 81-82)

Her enthusiasm surely robs the scene of any connotation of rape.

The radio version also deals successfully with the short story's many narratives, establishing a dynamic relationship between tellers, and their tales. The official narrator is a male voice, his tone weighty and portentous. Frequently, however, he is interrupted by the anecdotes, superstitions and rumours of Granny, an unofficial narrator; the two voices seem to vie with one another, his controlled and authoritative, hers with the colour and persuasion of a storyteller. This device introduces the idea of dominant (male) narratives and (female) counter-narratives; yet in the end, should Red Riding Hood, and should we, believe either? Ultimately the radio play, like Carter's story, works primarily to demythologise: we must create our own scripts.

In Neil Jordan's 1984 film version of the story, the narrative point of view appears to rest with the main storyteller, a female dreamer at home in her own bed. This bourgeois Sleeping Beauty is an adolescent, face smeared with inexpertly applied make-up, an erotic magazine open on the bed. She conjures the forest, symbolically dispatches her older sister to be killed by the wolves, and then enters into the dreamworld herself as a labourer's daughter, complete with red cape and crucifix. Jordan's film has received a mixed press; Maggie Anwell, for instance, argues that in responding to the market forces of mainstream cinema the radicalism of the original is watered down and its principles heavily compromised.¹⁰⁹ In her discussion, Anwell draws attention to several problematic aspects of the adaptation, focussing on three in particular: the framing structure of the dream, the film's use of special effects, and its staging of the final scene of confrontation.

¹⁰⁹ Anwell (1988) *op.cit.*

The choice of using the portmanteau device of the dream on one level seems appropriate. The story explores the boundaries between the safe and civilised, and the wild unknown; the dream is a doorway through which untamed fantasies can enter. The image of the dream can be traced within Carter's story, both in the author's use of ambiguities and shifting identities, and in her location of the action at a point when "[t]he malign door of the solstice still swings upon its hinges"¹¹⁰: it is a magic time. On the other hand, this framing has a distancing effect; what is bizarre and horrific in the story becomes apparently explicable by dream-logic. If the whole is dreamt, what becomes of the ambiguity between what is real and what only seems real? In addition, as Anwell comments, the dream device encourages

critics to offer psychological commentary redolent of the kind of prescriptive notions of how individuals are constituted which so offends many feminists. We are back in the traditional view of the febrile fantasy of the female imagination - an imagination which in this instance has fixed on the 'dual persona' of the werewolf.¹¹¹

Jordan's film attracted some notoriety for its use of 'animatronics', the special effects employed to represent the metamorphosis from man to wolf. The graphic transformations achieved are certainly startling and fairly gory, despite the makers' claim that the intention was not to "throw a bucket of blood" at the audience.¹¹² It is perhaps problematic that achieving these moments dominated the process and became a major selling-point for the movie, but more fundamental is the question of the appropriateness of this strategy *per se*. Carter comments in her Preface to the radio plays that "no werewolf make-up in the world can equal the werewolf you see in your mind's eye" (CR: 500) and this reflects interestingly on the film. Moreover, the literalness of the transformations effectively removes ambiguity about the nature of the beast, thereby reducing the complexity of Carter's exploration of sexuality.

Similarly, the film shies away from depicting the heroine's confident acceptance of the beast and instead shows the protagonist, Rosaleen, defend herself with a gun. Her fear is effectively conveyed, but her desire is written out of the script. Hit by a bullet, the

¹¹⁰ Carter (1996) *op.cit.*, 215.

¹¹¹ Anwell (1988) *op.cit.*, 82.

¹¹² Producer Stephen Woolley, quoted by Anwell *ibid.*

man metamorphoses into his animal form; she strokes him and cradles his head “maternally” (CR: 241), a sentimental image which in no way corresponds to the disturbing embrace of the story. The film does in fact later suggest that Rosaleen and the wolf become united, as we see a shot of two wolves - one with a crucifix around its neck - running away together into the forest; the image remains somewhat confusing, however, as the reasons for Rosaleen’s transformation are not revealed.

Despite these criticisms, Jordan’s film does I think produce effects which are at times both unsettling and beautiful. The stagey and improbable forest¹¹³, the reappearance in altered form within the dream of objects from the outer frame, the final shots of a wolf leaping through and shattering the glass of the dreamer’s bedroom window: all of these find an appropriate cinematic language to express the disturbing power of Carter’s re-visioning. In her introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, Carter observes:

Now we have machines to do our dreaming for us. But within that ‘video gadgetry’ might lie the source of a continuation, even a transformation, of storytelling and story-performance.¹¹⁴

This association is provocative, but is nevertheless backed up by other writers. Marina Warner argues that film is “essentially an oral medium” closely linked with traditional storytelling¹¹⁵; Laura Mulvey suggests that the cinema “creates links and cross-references that share the imprecision manifested by the workings of the mind or the tangled displacements of collective fantasy”.¹¹⁶ These observations could signal an invitation to filmmakers to create further and perhaps more radical explorations of Carter’s work.

Finally, I would like to comment briefly on a devised production of ‘The Company of Wolves’ created by Performance Studies students, which took place at University College Northampton in 1998. This was a very free adaptation, which did not attempt

¹¹³ The ‘forest’ was in fact created and filmed entirely within a studio.

¹¹⁴ Carter ed. (1990) *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*: London, Virago, xxi.

¹¹⁵ Warner, Marina (1993) ‘The Uses of Enchantment’: in Petrie, Duncan ed. (1993) *Cinema and the Realms of Enchantment*: London, British Film Institute, 24.

¹¹⁶ Mulvey (1994) in Sage ed. (1994) *op.cit.*, 239-40.

to take on every detail of the source. The group were in fact working with the dynamics of the musical sonata structure and applying this to theatrical performance, introducing two strong and potentially conflicting themes, intertwining them and then arriving at a resolution. The dominant themes drawn from the story were those of human sexual desire and animal violence.

The performance begins by staging the wedding night which is ‘gossiped about’ in the story, when a young woman’s bridegroom leaves their cottage to answer a “call of nature” (CR: 196) and returns years later, a werewolf. The warmth and humour of this first scene, the performers’ willingness to work with nakedness, the representation of the arousal of both characters followed by the obvious frustration of the bride, all serve to introduce the theme of sexual desire in no uncertain terms. The second theme of animal violence follows immediately on, as the audience sees the bridegroom ‘adopted’ by the wolves. The skill of the performer is central to the effectiveness of the scenes of metamorphosis; the naked human being, working through physical distortions and upheavals, is in my view better suited to conveying the ambiguities of this “body in the act of becoming”¹¹⁷ than the film version’s animatronics.

Having established the themes and potentially the conflict between them, the performance moves on to dramatise their integration and resolution through the Red Riding Hood narrative. The confident and curious heroine encounters the attractive stranger; in Granny’s cottage she meets the threat that he will ‘take her by force’ not with fear but with laughter and her own desire. Having removed her own clothes she undresses her would-be seducer, and the two are joined by the other performers as wolves who invade the space, biting, playing and coupling with each other. The final image we are left with is of an aggressive, carnivalesque celebration.

All three adaptations I have discussed here take on significant aspects of Carter’s source, and find potential and limitation in their chosen media. As a practitioner of theatre, it will not be surprising that I am most excited by the physicality of live

¹¹⁷ Swyt, Wendy (1996) ‘“Wolfings”: Angela Carter’s Becoming-Narrative’: in *Studies in Short Fiction* (1996) No.33, 318.

performance. In the staged versions of both *Vampirella* and *The Company of Wolves* the atmosphere created was palpable; the warmth and nearness of audience and actors makes it hard for the former to maintain a 'comfortable' distance from the piece, and hard for the latter *not* to become increasingly responsive to the playful and provocative tone of Carter's texts. Elaine Jordan has suggested that Carter is "great in rethinking the fables of Enlightened modernity, Cartesian distance from the body, its actions and desires"¹¹⁸ ; Descartes' dualistic frame of reference can thus perhaps be challenged by a theatricalisation of Carter in which the body is foregrounded, but without sacrificing the author's radical deconstruction of myth's ideological narratives.

¹¹⁸ Jordan, Elaine (1994) 'The Dangerous Edge': in Sage ed. (1994) *op.cit.*, 196.

CHAPTER V Other countries

In relation to the texts examined earlier in the thesis, those contained within this chapter show a distinct shift of emphasis, in their engagement with myth, from the social to the psychological. Where previously we have seen myth interrogated and in some cases exposed as the bearer of false wisdom, here it is perceived as a potent undercurrent beneath the surface of human interaction. Our lives are affected, even directed, it is suggested, by forces of which we may be unaware; such forces find their expression in our language, our dreams, and our myths. Through a process of excavation, digging deep into images and narratives, vital knowledge can be uncovered which previously lay buried, or which we were unable to recognise with clarity. This is a search which is, in a sense, inward-looking; it is a journey towards personal psychological growth. However, if this journey is undertaken by members of a particular social group - here by individual women, who participate in a wider, broadly feminist community - then the meanings uncovered, if shared, may prove to be of sociocultural, rather than simply personal, significance.

For both texts in this section, the territory of myth stands for that of the unconscious, the realm of repressed emotion and desire. In examining how the authors of these pieces have engaged with this material, I have found it helpful to make reference to a variety of psychological approaches, in particular those developed by Freud, Jung and Lacan. (I also discuss the potential and the problems of these positions in terms of feminist thinking.) All three men found in myth a highly significant articulation of human behaviour, primarily of the workings of the unconscious. As I indicated in Chapter One, Freud perceived certain myths, and the mythic patterns of his patients' dreamings, as expressions of repressed sexual desires. Most famous of Freud's theories, in this respect, is that of the Oedipus complex, based on his reading of the triadic relationship of Oedipus, Laius and Jocasta. Like Freud, Jung saw the mind as the centre of conflicting forces, but disagreed with the former's belief that repressed sexual impulses formed the fundamental underlying energy. Jung argued that mythic images in dreaming issued not only from the patient's individual unconscious, but from

a collective unconscious common to all humanity. This second layer of the unconscious importantly finds its expression in the archetypal images of myth and fairy tale, and, for Jung, analysis of these symbolic representations is a necessary step in achieving the desired aim: the establishment of harmony in the psyche. Jung's analytical psychology is thus indebted to Freud's thought, but also represents a departure from it; it was not a development which Freud himself supported.

Freud was working early in the twentieth century, Jung a little later. Writing several decades after Freud, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan both championed and in some respects transformed Freudian thinking. Lacan believed that the unconscious was more than the source of primal instincts, arbitrarily connected to ideas and images; rather, he argued, the structures of the unconscious map the structures of conscious awareness, a direct interrelationship governed primarily by our experience of language. The Oedipus myth became central for Lacan, as it was for Freud. For Lacan, however, the child's desire for the mother and growing recognition of the authority of the father represent key stages in a civilising process of language acquisition. Lacan's argument that language structures the social subject distinguishes him from Freud, for whom analysis of language (in its various forms) was the key to understanding unconscious 'instincts'. Some distance away from both Freud and Lacan is Jung, who believed in archetypal energies behind language, which transcended individual or cultural differences.

Of the two re-visionings of myth I discuss in this chapter, one engages implicitly with psychological perspectives, the other explicitly. My first case study is *Demeter Beneath the Sand*¹, a performance piece devised by Serena Sartori and Renata Coluccini of the Milan-based Teatro Cooperativo del Sole. *Demeter Beneath the Sand* is not a play of characters as such, but rather of types. The two performers play the roles of two modern-day women trapped in a surreal landscape of rocking chairs and tea sets, half-buried in sand; the empty rituals of their interaction are repeatedly disrupted as their minds and bodies become temporarily invaded by spirits of the women of ancient

¹ Sartori, Serena & Coluccini, Renata, trans. Bassnett, Susan (1995) *Demeter Beneath the Sand*: in *Contemporary Theatre Review* (1995) Vol.2 Part 3, 114-127. All references are from this version and will be indicated in the text by the abbreviation DBS.

Greek myth, acts of possession which, in the violence of their emotional impact, contrast starkly with the modern women's 'normal' state. In examining the content and structure of this piece, I have found Jungian analysis particularly relevant (although I do not know whether or not such a perspective consciously informed their work). The mythic figures who seemingly disrupt the activities of the two women are referred to in the text as 'archetypes'; whilst this term has come into common use, it remains a key concept for Jung, as I have suggested. *Demeter Beneath the Sand* also shows that these archetypal figures represent powerful emotions and desires which the women have unconsciously denied. Possession thus signifies the return of the repressed, in theatricalised form, with the ultimate aim (as it is for Jung) of reintegrating these 'shadow' behaviours into the psyche. A feminist perspective on this approach further reveals that the emotions which the women deny are, unsurprisingly, those which conflict with the patriarchal feminine ideal.

The second piece I examine is Hélène Cixous' *The Name of Oedipus: Song of the Forbidden Body*², a dramatic text initially performed as an opera with music by André Boucourechliev. This is a re-visioning which is directly informed by Freud's and Lacan's perspectives on this famous myth, and which offers criticism of both. Cixous' reexamination of the triangle at the heart of the myth seeks to release unconscious desires, in the name of personal, and ultimately wider cultural, transformation. In this move she refuses to stop at the barrier of social taboo, working through this towards a vision of an ideal, harmonised self which exists beyond divisive binarisms of masculine/feminine. As in *Demeter Beneath the Sand*, it is here implied that repressed desires must be acknowledged, as part of a necessary process of healing rifts in the psyche, rifts which are an inescapable, violent result of the putting-in-place of patriarchy. Cixous explicitly terms that which has been repressed 'feminine' (although not *female*). She is proposing, therefore, that recovery of these feminine energies is a means of curing a culture poisoned by the false logic of an oppressive ideology.

Cixous' emphasis on the power of the feminine is perhaps most famously articulated in

² Cixous, Hélène (1978) *The Name of Oedipus: Song of the Forbidden Body*: in Makward & Miller (1995) *op.cit.*, 253-326. All references are from this version and will be indicated in the text by the abbreviation NO.

her impassioned calls for an *écriture féminine*, a form of writing which, she claims, has the potential to shatter the restrictive structures of language and thus restore voices which have long been culturally suppressed. This proposal of an *écriture féminine*, feminist critical responses to it as a concept, and its implications when translated into writing for the theatre, are all issues I debate within this section. Both *Demeter Beneath the Sand* and *The Name of Oedipus* adopt strategies which could be associated with the ideals of *écriture féminine*, strategies which, for example, seek to challenge the authority of language and the coherence of the subject; the texts can thus, to some extent, be examined as a form of 'theory in practice' (although in the case of the former, the theory is not explicitly applied).

Demeter Beneath the Sand and *The Name of Oedipus* thus offer theatrical, psychologically-based investigations into the relationships between women, myth, language and power. In feminist terms, these are both projects which emphasise exploration of identity and aesthetic experimentation, rather than the communication of an ideological message. Clearly, these are experiments which have a significant role within the wider feminist counter-public sphere; both seem to support the function, identified by Felski, of developing an oppositional, gendered identity, and a consciousness of community amongst women.³ There are dangers, however, in following this line too far. Emphasis on 'common identity', for example, may well obscure vital elements of cultural difference and tend towards a problematic essentialism; this is a major criticism which has been levelled at *écriture féminine*, as I shall discuss. There are also issues relating to the accessibility of these experiments, in every sense; aesthetic 'radicalism', for instance, is frequently articulated through an arguably exclusive mode of (play)writing dependent upon sophisticated stylistic techniques.

In direct relation to the issue of access is the question of performance context, and here the two pieces can be interestingly contrasted. *Demeter Beneath the Sand*, as small-scale experimental theatre, was created and presented within what might be termed the feminist theatre 'laboratory', a relatively private sphere reminiscent, perhaps, of the

³ Felski (1989) *op.cit.*, 167.

artistic salon⁴ ; the audience for this work is not the general public, but, on the whole, members of the same community of interest. Cixous' *The Name of Oedipus*, on the other hand, was performed in the main courtyard of the Papal Palace as part of the Avignon Festival. This location establishes the piece as open to the public, yet with access possibly still restricted in the sense that the production clearly represents the 'high cultural' end of the festival spectrum (and with cost, perhaps, as another inhibiting factor). In the case of both projects, it can thus be seen that forms of privilege may be at work which mean that an ideal of inclusiveness for women is not always met in reality.

Landscapes of myth and theatre: Serena Sartori and Renata Coluccini's *Demeter Beneath the Sand*

Not for a moment dare we succumb to the illusion that an archetype can be finally explained and disposed of. Even the best attempts at explanation are only more or less successful translations into another metaphorical language. [...] The most we can do is to *dream the myth onwards* and give it a modern dress.⁵

In Chapter Two I examined two short plays performed and co-written by Franca Rame, perhaps the best known of all Italian women theatre practitioners. I look now at another example of Italian theatre, from a decade later: *Demeter Beneath the Sand*, written and performed by Serena Sartori and Renata Coluccini of the Milan-based Teatro Cooperativo del Sole. In the introduction to her published translation of the piece, Susan Bassnett describes it as "in many ways absolutely typical of the best of Italian women's theatre work in the 1980s".⁶ *Demeter Beneath the Sand* is in fact "typical" of Italian alternative theatre in general, in that (as noted earlier) the text indicates a framework for performance but demands a high level of improvisatory skill from its

⁴ Sue-Ellen Case notes that since women have generally been confined to the domestic domain and denied access to the public sphere, "their performance space has often been within their houses"; hence the salon (and Case discusses those run by Rahel Varnhagen and Natalie Barney as examples) can be seen as an important site for women's artistic investigations. Case (1988) *op.cit.*, 46-53.

⁵ Jung, quoted in Wehr, Demaris (1988) *Jung and Feminism: Liberating Archetypes*: London, Routledge, 92.

⁶ Bassnett, Susan (1995) *op.cit.*, 112.

performers. As an example of women's theatre, the focus on ancient myth and its relationship to the lives of contemporary women represents a continuation of investigations by Rame and others, but with a new emphasis and a markedly different performance style.

One of the most striking features of the performance, which can be deduced from the printed text, is its stage environment. In direct contrast to the sparse settings of Rame's monologues, *Demeter Beneath the Sand* is a performance rich with visual images, textures, objects and complex, layered costumes. It is this careful creation of environment, coupled with the multiple resonances of the myth of Demeter, referenced in the title, which have led me to focus my discussion around the theme of landscape. I consider that this emphasis will pay due attention to the performance setting (analysing this staged environment both for its own sake and as a context for action), but will also facilitate examination of myth as, arguably, a crucially important site of female experience. To ground the examination, I will begin by describing the theatrical landscape indicated by the text.

At the beginning of the play, the first image we are presented with is of a white room - white because the room is shaped by hanging white sheets and women's white clothes. There is a white rocking chair covered with a white blanket, in one corner a white "neoclassic" vase (DBS: 115) and in another corner - near the audience - is a white teapot and two white cups. The stage floor is covered with sand. Touches of darkness are introduced into this landscape through a silhouetted figure in a black mackintosh standing holding a white rake, and a black and white radio which is balanced on the white vase. All is silent and still. Suddenly the silence is broken by the sound of whispering female voices coming from the radio, and the stillness disturbed by movement as the black figure starts to rake the sand around the space. A second black figure enters with a wheelbarrow, pushes it to centre stage, unloads more sand, and exits; the figure then reenters, removes the blanket from the chair, and exits again. While the black figures perform these actions, the whispering sounds grow into a kind of music of wailing, screaming words:

THE WHISPERING VOICES: Here they are ... those women with no memories in them ... now they'll have to remember our stories... They're flitting from one memory to another, one to another, with their false pearls and frowsy feathers ... Look at them ... they're coming ... sand ... sand ... memories - dancing on the memories means dancing on the sand ... (DBS: 115)

As this voice-music dies away, the black figures exit and the actresses reenter but this time in white; one, indicated in the text simply as R (Renata Coluccini)⁷, wears white evening dress plus tennis shoes, the other, S (Serena Sartori), lace and frills and white make-up. They appear to be taken aback by the sight of each other, as if each is seeing a distorted mirror image. S sits down in the rocking chair. R turns the radio off, then stands upstage toying with her pearl necklace. The picture we are presented with is one of boredom, aimlessness and irritation.

As the performance unfolds, certain patterns begin to emerge. The 'life' of the two women in white, signed with impressive theatrical economy, appears trivial and purposeless, their actions and conversations disconnected. They attempt to communicate through games, tests and apparently petty quarrels, but as their forms of time-passing lack purpose, they quickly lose interest and move on to try others. Both women articulate a dissatisfaction with their existence as it is; R fantasises continually of love, believing 'a man' is needed to make her life complete (although she knows none), whereas S craves a new landscape altogether, one she has never seen but intuitively exists: "I want to go somewhere, but I don't know where it is." (DBS: 118) Thus, although both women are conscious of 'lack' in their current lives, neither has a clear sense of how to remedy it.

In stark contrast to the women in white are those in black, a series of mythic female "characters that return to life" (DBS: 114): Demeter, Phaedra, Hecuba, Clytemnestra, Medea and Penthesilea. These characters are represented to us as buried, or hidden, 'under the sand' and are signified on the simplest level by the actresses' wearing black

⁷ The references to R and S in the text imply that it is Sartori's and Coluccini's identities as actresses, rather than as 'characters', which are foregrounded. As the performance was also created, in part, through improvisation, it is probable that the actions attributed to R. and S. respectively, and also the particular archetypal characters who 'possess' them, come from material developed by each actress in rehearsal and may thus have personal significance.

clothes: at one point a black jacket is put on top of a white dress, another time white clothes are removed to reveal a black robe underneath. The stories of these mythic figures - or fragments of them - come to us in two ways: through the voices from the radio (suggesting, perhaps, that 'currents' connect us with our ancient past?), and through the reincarnation of these figures in the memories and bodies of the two women in white. The implication of the performance action is clearly that the figures, and the powerful emotions they represent, are a forgotten part of R and S themselves.

At several points in the action a game or apparently idle conversation between the two women will spark off, for one or both of them, a fragment of something deeper - a memory. This personal memory acts as a channel for a mythic character to enter and 'possess' the body of one of them. Thus R's memory of wearing her mother's dress seems to induce a trance in S, through which S gradually becomes Demeter and R represents Persephone to her; at another point in the play a game of pretend cooking leads to the command from S to "Eat!" and R takes on the character of Penthesilea,

the woman warrior who, in her search for absolute love and absolute freedom underwent a macabre rite and ate the body of her beloved, Achilles. (DBS: 126)

The conclusions to these 'possessions' - which are often only brief - are presented as gradual emergence from a trance.

Having indicated the main actions, patterns and colours of the piece, I will deepen my analysis of these as landscape. It seems to me that as audience we read the theatrical landscape of *Demeter Beneath the Sand* in two centrally important ways. We see a landscape/world/space inhabited by two women in white whose lives and behaviour appear trivial and ultimately purposeless; we also see, imposed on the same stage space, a landscape which is home to the archetypal figures of Greek mythology. The landscape itself does not alter except in the colour change in the women's clothing between white and black, but our perception of it shifts because of the difference in the way the space is inhabited by R and S, and by the characters of myth.

For R and S the landscape is one they are compelled to inhabit, "*condemned to 'eternal*

Sunday afternoons, where time hangs uselessly". (DBS: 114) (I will return later in the discussion to question why they might be "condemned" to live in this particular Hell.) The expanse of sand implies a wasteland, a metaphor suggestive of the quality of their lives. The sandscape is broken up somewhat by the inclusion of the white rocking chair, vase, teapot and cups (objects with strong feminine associations), yet as all these are indicators of leisure in this context - since there are no signifiers of meaningful activity to serve as a counterpart - they do not take away from the sense of futility. Given also that the teapot is revealed, halfway through the play, to be full of blood⁸, the overall effect seems something like a nightmare scene from *Alice in Wonderland*. All this whiteness - of the clothes, sheets and objects - connotes, on one level, virginal innocence; however, within the context of the action (or inaction), the effect is rather one of suffocation. This world of white dresses and white washing might have romantic allure, but it is the allure of the snow which invites the traveller to sleep in it, never to reawaken.⁹ (The scene also hints at a whitewash; that pristine surface could be covering something less romantically appealing.) The black and white radio is, however, one item on stage which breaks up the monotonous expanse of white and also implies a useful purpose, suggesting the possibility of communication from an outside world; the whispering voices that come from it, and indeed its two colours, also indicate to us that it provides a channel between the two landscapes of present and past and allows for intrusion of myth into what is presented here (albeit in abstract terms) as the everyday.

There is another level, however, to the landscape as inhabited by R and S, which comes from the way in which the space becomes coloured both by the women's fragments of memory, and by their wishes. This can be seen in the following passage:

⁸ I am interested to note that this image of the teapot full of blood also occurs in Churchill's and Lan's *A Mouthful of Birds*, discussed in Chapter Three. In the sequence 'Psychic Attack', Lena attempts to maintain a facade of domestic normality for her husband Roy, all the while struggling to ignore the promptings of a 'spirit' who urges her to kill her baby. The sequence concludes, following the murder, with Lena's line: "I poured the teapot and blood came out." (MOB: 28) In both *A Mouthful of Birds* and *Demeter Beneath the Sand* the image expresses vividly the intrusion of the savage into the domestic and 'civilised'. There is also an implicit comment on ideals of femininity: the Victorian oppositions of Woman as 'demon' or as 'angel in the house' are here powerfully conflated.

⁹ It is worth noting, however, that the job of keeping linen white traditionally falls to women, who should expect - according to the advertising media - to be judged according to the 'whiteness of their whites'...

- R:** You know what you really want? You want everything made easy for you, beds of roses and silver spoons...
- S:** I don't want beds of roses at all. The grass is never greener on the other side of the fence. [...] All I wanted was grass to grow in my own garden, even though I didn't have one, but I did have a balcony and a lot of flower pots and I used to look and see if anything special was growing out there.
- R:** Did it?
- S:** No. (DBS: 118-119)

This interchange is soon followed by another which is similarly imaging an alternative landscape, this time through an improvised magazine-style quiz:

- R:** Right. You're sitting on a fantastic beach, with a girlfriend who just won't leave because she never wants to leave and she can't ever bring herself to leave. Then all of a sudden he appears. Amazingly handsome [...] (DBS: 119)

The allusion to the "fantastic beach" comments ironically on the dreary expanse of sand before us. The girlfriend who will never leave is a reference, perhaps, to S; this interpretation would be borne out by the play's ending, where S is left alone in the space, rummaging in the sand and muttering: "It can't be over, I'm still searching for it..." (DBS: 126) However, given that the action of the performance is roughly cyclical (the stage directions indicate that R and S conclude the event by tidying the space, "ready for it all to start again": DBS: 127), neither of the women 'leave' in any real sense.¹⁰

At the moments when the archetypal characters take possession of the women, the atmosphere changes. S undresses, "*removing the childish white garment to reveal a long, tragic black gown*" (DBS: 117); later R "*finds an old severely cut black lace jacket under the sand*" (DBS: 121). In both cases, it is suggested that the landscape literally has hidden depths. Beneath the arid sand and the girlish dresses is black, indicating

¹⁰ In many ways, the sense of waiting in *Demeter Beneath the Sand* is reminiscent of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Like R and S, Vladimir and Estragon seem trapped in a relatively barren landscape, using word-games and tangled reminiscence to pass the time. The two men repeatedly articulate their intention to leave, yet do not: the play ends with the words "Shall we go?" and "Yes, let's go", but with the stage direction: "*They do not move*". Between these contradictory impulses, it is the physical stasis which, I believe, makes the strongest impact on an audience; in *Demeter Beneath the Sand* the characters likewise talk of breaking the monotonous patterns of their lives, yet the audience only sees these reinforced. Beckett, Samuel (1952) *Waiting for Godot*: in Beckett (1990) *The Complete Dramatic Works*: London, Faber and Faber, 88.

darkness, weight of meaning, passion, perhaps tragedy. These dark figures are starker and more exposed than R and S, “with their false pearls and frowsy feathers” (DBS: 115); the most extreme contrast is offered in Penthesilea, who wears an X-ray plate on her breast “like a suit of armour that exposes her heart and her bones, a symbol of absolute nakedness”. (DBS: 126) These characters appear at home in this landscape in a way that the women in white do not; as noted, at the start of the performance the figures in black shift sand with a rake and wheelbarrow, implying care for the land, if not necessarily ownership of it.

The first action of the performance - that of raking the sand - points to the relationship between nature and culture. The figure with the rake, although not named within the text, suggests Demeter, widely identified in Greek mythology as the goddess of agriculture¹¹. When Demeter is reincarnated in the body of S later in the play, she articulates her own role and her relationship with her stolen daughter in terms of land and the seasons:

S: Stolen from me! My golden haired spring, the ripe corn of my harvest. [...] My little girl, without you I can do nothing but claw at the ice that holds me back from your smile. Life of my death, death of my life, life of my death... (DBS: 117)

Like R and S, the archetypal figures conjure places and scenes that are not directly visible to us. Unlike the two women, who are relatively inarticulate and heavily reliant on the phrases and imagery of women’s magazines, these characters express an intimate and fully-felt involvement with their landscapes. R, as Phaedra, addresses an unseen Hippolytus:

R: This house is full of your shadow. The house is a body, I touch it, it touches me, it throws itself upon me, especially when night comes. Flames from the torches lick at my thighs, they linger with subtle shuddering behind my left ear, they bite my nipples. Their saliva glistens, it burns me, restores me, brands me. I no longer know where to conceal myself. (DBS: 121)

The stage directions indicate here that the whole of Phaedra’s speech to Hippolytus is to be addressed directly to a member of the audience. (DBS: 121) Thus it is the women in

¹¹ See for example Graves (1978) *op.cit.* and Gadon (1990) *op.cit.*.

black who make eye contact - and perhaps the most profound emotional contact - with us, while the two in white behave as if oblivious to our presence.

In the pale, antiseptic landscape of the women in white, "*feeling is almost blotted out*" (DBS: 114), but the world of the archetypal figures is by contrast dark and bloody, a place of passion and pain. These two realms overlap, however, partly because when one woman becomes entranced the other is able to watch her from some kind of liminal space; one example of this is the Demeter sequence, when R speaks "*as though she wants to push S even deeper into her trance, make her touch bottom*" (DBS: 117). In addition, elements from the everyday landscape become transformed by the archetypes. The teapot and cups of blood, a grotesque marriage of civilised and savage, are exploited by the figure of Clytemnestra in a sequence in which she possesses both R and S simultaneously:

- R:** I wanted to force him to look me in the face at least in the moment of his death. Look me in the face.
S: (*shrieks*) A-a-ga-memnon!
(*R. throws the cup of blood against the sheet at the rear of the stage. The scream and the gesture are both so violent that both women remain stunned, silenced, immobile for a few seconds, as the red stain spreads across the sheet...*) (DBS: 124)

The bloodstain on the sheet is a highly evocative image, symbolising Clytemnestra's passionate murder of Agamemnon but also connoting menstrual blood, defloration (possibly enforced) and childbirth, interpretations which are supported by S's miming of a pregnant woman a few lines later and her subsequent possession by Medea.

The shock of the thrown cup and the scream 'wake' both women abruptly, in contrast to their dreamy surfacing at other points in the performance. For a moment it seems as if the explosive colour and passion could be a part of the lives of the women in white also, or could have been once: a momentary connection with memories of desire and violent feeling that generally lie buried, 'beneath the sand'. This moment of potential awareness following the hurling of the cup is broken, however, when R and S find the air suddenly full of invisible insects¹² which they begin to swat, in a burst of genuine

¹² Possibly a reference to Sartre's *The Flies* (itself a reinterpretation of the *Oresteia*)? Sartre (1962) *op.cit.*.

energy. Intent on killing them, including those that they identify as mothers - with “bellies [...] full of blood on which to feed their young” (DBS: 124) - R and S beat at their own bodies with violence.

The previously passionless existence of the women in white is, it seems, becoming infected by the persistent violence which surfaces in them in the form of these archetypal possessions. We have seen the agony of Hecuba, a mother grieving at the slaughter of her son in battle. (DBS: 122) Through Clytemnestra’s murder of her husband, we acknowledge women’s own capability for violence. (DBS: 123-124) We next witness Medea’s infanticide and ritualistic burial of her child’s body - that of a “naked white doll” - under under the sand. (DBS: 125) Most violent of all, finally, is Penthesilea who describes her own vampire-like killing of Achilles¹³ :

R: And he, drenched in his own blood, touched my sweet face and said: “Penthesilea, my bride, why have you done this to me? This is not the day of feasting you promised me.” But I had torn off his breastplate, and sunk my teeth into his white breast, competing with the hounds. His blood ran from my mouth and hands, and I kissed him to death. I kissed him to death. (DBS: 126)

The pain inflicted by the archetypal figures is matched by the pain they feel, physically as well as emotionally. R, as Clytemnestra, states:

R: I killed him. They talked about rivers of blood, but in fact he hardly bled at all. I bled more than that when I brought my son into the world
(DBS: 123),

words which lead us back to the idea of landscape; the extravagant metaphor is mocked, yet identified with in terms of women’s experience. The extreme violence in the words, actions and emotions of the archetypes is unnerving, yet the fragments of their world that we are shown, although part-buried, appear alive and vital; this contrasts pointedly with the emptiness, strewn with remnants of ‘civilised society’, inhabited by R and S.

¹³ Sartori and Coluccini state that Von Kleist’s text is the source for this version of the Penthesilea myth. Most reference works I have consulted, however, state that it was Achilles who killed Penthesilea on the battlefield, rather than the other way around. See for example Bell (1991) *op.cit.* and Walker (1995) *op.cit.*.

I want to look in more detail now at the mythological strata in the performance landscape which has, gradually, become uncovered. As I have indicated, a whole series of archetypal figures are introduced into the action. Given its title, however, the myth of Demeter might be thought to hold a key to an understanding of the piece as a whole. This is a myth which is directly connected to questions of land. As already stated, Demeter is identified as the goddess of agriculture and fruitfulness. Her daughter Persephone (also known as Kore), is picking flowers in a meadow when the earth opens up and swallows her and she is taken down into the underworld to be the bride of Hades. In her anger and grief at the loss of her child, Demeter forbids the trees to yield fruit and plants to grow, swearing that the earth must remain barren until her daughter is restored. Hades finally promises that Persephone will be returned to her mother on condition that she has not tasted the food of the dead whilst in the underworld. According to mythology, however, she has eaten seven pomegranate seeds; the agreement reached is that she will spend part of every year with Hades, as Queen of Tartarus, and part on earth with Demeter.

The myth of Demeter has been interpreted in a variety of ways, many of which are helpful for an understanding of *Demeter Beneath the Sand*.¹⁴ On one level, the story provides a popular explanation for the processes of nature: Persephone represents fruitfulness, and her months in darkness account for the relative barrenness of the earth in winter, contrasted with the fertility of the rest of the year. In the play, this opposition is reflected in the white (daylight) and black (underworld) of the actresses' costumes, although here it is the dark realm which seems more alive and fertile than the light. (Perhaps the white layers suggest winter snows?) Socio-cultural analysis, on the other hand, has interpreted this story, with its enforced marriage of a pre-Hellenic goddess (Persephone) to a Hellenic god (Hades) as a reference to "male usurpation of the female agricultural mysteries in primitive times"¹⁵. In *Demeter Beneath the Sand*, Sartori and Coluccini reclaim these mysteries as feminine; the sand on stage stands for "earth, as

¹⁴ I consider further interpretations of the myth in my discussion of Sarah Daniels' *Neptune* in Chapter Two.

¹⁵ Graves (1978) *op.cit.*, 93.

primordial element, as mother” (DBS: 114) and the opening actions of the performance hint at a time when planting, cultivating and harvesting were specifically the tasks of women.

The perspectives I have indicated above offer helpful insights, but perhaps especially applicable to Sartori’s and Coluccini’s re-visioning, as I have already noted, is a Jungian approach. Of particular relevance is Jung’s theory of archetypes, referred to earlier in the chapter. Jung states that

when an archetypal situation occurs we suddenly feel an extraordinary sense of release, as though transported, or caught up by an overwhelming power. At such moments we are no longer individuals, but the race.¹⁶

This description closely resembles the patterns of *Demeter Beneath the Sand*. The mythic figures who possess the bodies of R and S are not archetypes in themselves, but recognisable personifications of archetypal impulses. At points when the individual experiences or actions of R and S become potentially ‘archetypal’ – a memory of a mother’s loss, the sight of a dead body, being forced to eat against one’s will – the women do become ‘transported’ to the alternative landscape I have discussed throughout this section.

Following the pattern of the Demeter-Persephone myth, the seemingly ‘virginal’ women in white find themselves drawn, against their conscious will, into the underworld (literally, under the sand, or under the white layer of the costumes) inhabited by the women in black. As might perhaps be expected, this darker realm erupts with those emotions and desires which are feared, suppressed or denied by R and S; in this sense, it relates to Jung’s archetype of the shadow, his term for the ‘negative’ – often despised and repressed – side of the personality. As I have shown, the conversations and games of the women in white are shallow, two-dimensional even; as individuals, and in relationship to each other, they lack depth. However, their conventional fantasies of romance, for example – the “[a]mazingly handsome” man advancing across the deserted beach (DBS: 119) – lead to a violent confrontation with

¹⁶ Jung, quoted in Ruthven (1979) *op.cit.*, 21-22.

forbidden sexual passion: the desire of Phaedra for Hippolytus. In other words, the performance shows how that which has been repressed nevertheless insists on finding expression.

Jung states that to become conscious of the shadow “involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real”.¹⁷ In *Demeter Beneath the Sand* the dark, mythic figures are “present and real” for the audience - and more vivid, indeed, than the women in white. The piece demonstrates, however, not the recognition of the shadow and its successful integration into the conscious personality, but the characters’ continued resistance to it. That the women become ‘possessed’ is itself an expression of their refusal to accept their shadow selves.¹⁸ As I have indicated, the action of the performance is (by implication) cyclical, and the women in white seem to gain no awareness of how their own self-destructive paths might be redirected. The archetypal figures, and the passions they embody, remain unacknowledged despite being urgently needed and desired. As the performance concludes, S cries despairingly: “It can’t be over, I’m still searching for it... It can’t be, I have to find it... I need to find it...” (DBS: 126); neither she nor R have consciously ‘heard’ the communications from the underworld which have so vividly been revealed to the audience.

The potent mythic landscape of *Demeter Beneath the Sand* shows up the daily reality of R and S, by contrast, as barren. Whilst the black figures can be seen, as I have suggested, as part of the underworld, on another level Hell is the absence of emotion and meaning which is the norm for the women in white. In relation to the Demeter-Persephone myth, the white figures symbolise both mother and daughter. As Demeter, they seek the lost part of themselves which they feel has become buried - in the subconscious, in forgotten art or literature, under the sand; as Persephone, they both

¹⁷ Jung (1951) ‘The Shadow’: in Storr ed. (1983) op.cit., 91.

¹⁸ In her commentary on Jung’s theories, Demaris Wehr states that ‘projection’ and ‘possession’ are two typical ways humans experience their shadow before consciously coming to know it. Projection is “the perceptual ‘trick’ by which we perceive in others what are actually characteristics in ourselves”; possession, on the other hand, “means being taken over by a ‘subpersonality’ of which one is unaware, ‘acting out’ in its voice without consciously choosing to do so and without knowing that one is doing it.” This latter behaviour relates closely, I think, to the patterns of *Demeter Beneath the Sand*. Wehr (1988) op.cit., 57.

hear and do not hear the voice of the mother from whom they have become distanced. As we have seen, *Demeter Beneath the Sand* focusses primarily not on the abduction itself, but on the period of separation of mother and daughter. However, the myth tells us that this period is in fact *not* infertile, but rather a time of incubation; growth is taking place underground, even if there is no evidence of this on the surface. From this perspective, the play might be read as less pessimistic, and more productive, than it first appears. Marie-Louise von Franz writes that

before a period of particular activity in the unconscious, there is a tendency toward a long period of complete sterility. It is, for instance, a normal condition in the creative personality that before some new piece of work [...], people usually pass through a period of listlessness and depression and waiting; life is stale. If you analyze such people you see that the energy is meanwhile accumulating in the unconscious [...].¹⁹

From this perspective, *Demeter Beneath the Sand* could be read as an exploration of those times in women's lives which may appear barren and without purpose, but which in reality are periods of subconscious preparation for change. Perhaps this is why the women in white are 'condemned' to live here; it is a necessary stage in a process of psychological development. The feelings of emptiness they experience are not removed as a result of their possession by these archetypal figures, but the encounters do express vividly, in von Franz's words, "energy [...] accumulating in the unconscious". The story of the performance is thus not concluded, as S recognises when she insists that it "can't be over" (DBS: 126); the continuing sound of the whispering voices from the radio suggest, too, that these shoots from the underworld will continue to penetrate the sterile landscape until they are acknowledged and given space to grow.

Does the analysis I outline above lead to an unjustifiably 'positive' reading of the text, given that we seem to see little or no advance in the understanding of the two women in white? In proposing this interpretation, I am returning to the myth of Demeter around which the performance is created. In the winter months, the land is not infertile; aside from what does grow above ground, we know that this is a period of germination beneath the surface. This is not an argument for passivity. Like Demeter, R and S search for what they have lost, even though they find it hard to accept consciously the

¹⁹ von Franz (1993) *op.cit.*, 27.

feminine power - in its terrifying, as well as attractive aspects - that they find. However, the whitewashed (patriarchal) world needs to acknowledge its (feminine) shadow. Starhawk, writer and witch, describes the mythic imagery of goddesses and gods as channels, or “doorways leading out of patriarchal culture”.²⁰ She states that in our society

we need the rage of Kore’s mother, the rage that will not submit, that rises out of despair, that brings results.²¹

I think *Demeter Beneath the Sand* works in this way. We witness women’s despair; we also witness rage bubbling to the surface, intent upon making itself heard.

Journeying to the heart:

Hélène Cixous’ *The Name of Oedipus:*

Song of the Forbidden Body

What relief, when on entering into this place the lie, which is our daily politeness, comes to an end and we begin to hear the dialogue of hearts! [...] And we rejoice that it is not forbidden, in this marvellous land, to cry out, to strike blows, to translate into breath, into sweat, into song, the suffering of being a human inhabitant of our time. We are the characters of an epic that we are forbidden, by the laws of mediocrity and of prudence, to live.²²

As I indicated in Chapter One, Hélène Cixous is a writer whose work has been influential, but also highly controversial. Re-visioning of myth is a thread which runs through the whole body of her work, as well as forming the basis of individual texts.²³ It is in part her mythological referencing, in my view, which gives her work considerable poetic appeal, yet at the same time leaves her open to accusations of

²⁰ Starhawk (1982) *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex & Politics*. Boston, Beacon Press, 74.

²¹ *Ibid*, 84.

²² Cixous (1986-7) ‘The place of Crime, the place of Pardon’, trans. Prenowitz, Eric: in Drain, Richard ed. (1995) *Twentieth Century Theatre: A Sourcebook*. London, Routledge, 341.

²³ As well as *The Name of Oedipus*, Cixous’ plays *L’Indiade ou l’Inde de leurs rêves* (The Indiad, or the India of Their Dreams, Paris, Théâtre du Soleil, 1987) and *La Ville Parjure ou le Réveil des Erinyes* (The Perjured City or the Awakening of the Erinyes, Paris, Théâtre du Soleil, 1994) and novel *Le Livre de Promethea* (The Book of Promethea, Paris, Gallimard, 1983) offer sustained explorations of specific myths.

evading material realities and seeking refuge in her own particular utopia. Cixous does suggest, playfully, that within her work aesthetic strategies may at times take precedence over social commitment:

I would lie if I said that I am a political woman, not at all. In fact, I have to assemble the two words, political and poetic. Not to lie to you, I must confess that I put the accent on the poetic. I do it so that the political does not repress, because the political is something cruel and hard and so rigorously real that sometimes I feel like consoling myself by crying and shedding poetic tears.²⁴

In this section I will explore Cixous' dramatic text *The Name of Oedipus* (1978) and ask whether, as a re-visioning of myth, it retreats from or reflects on "the rigorously real". I have chosen this piece, rather than one of her more recent re-visionings, because it is both widely available in English translation, and offers a response to one of the key myths of modern consciousness. Before exploring the myth and Cixous' treatment of it, however, it will be helpful to provide a brief background to the writer and her thought.

Hélène Cixous was born in 1937, in Algeria. Her cultural identity is complex; her father was a French-colonial of Jewish origin, her mother Austro-German, and Cixous herself is fluent in several languages (with German, rather than French, as her native tongue). She has had a prestigious career as an academic, lecturing at Bordeaux, the Sorbonne and Nanterre, and in 1968 founding the experimental Université de Paris VIII-Vincennes in the aftermath of the student riots of the same year. In 1974 she established the Centre de Recherches en Etudes Féminines, of which she is still the Chair.²⁵ Since the 1960s, she has published around seventy novels, plays and essays.

Within Felski's model of the feminist counter-public sphere, Cixous' position is an interesting one. At certain points in her career, Cixous has declared her rejection of feminism, seeing it as a bourgeois demand for women to gain power within an existing patriarchal system; on the other hand, she supports what she prefers to describe as the women's *movement* (for her emphasising fluidity rather than the fixity of

²⁴ Cixous, quoted in Moi, Toril (1991) *Sexual/Textual Politics*: London, Routledge, 123.

²⁵ Conley, Verena Andermatt (1991) 'Hélène Cixous': in Sartori, Eva Martin & Zimmerman, Dorothy Wayne eds. (1991) *French Women Writers*: Westport, Greenwood Press, 66-67.

‘feminism’).²⁶ For her own part, Cixous’ investigations into ‘the feminine’ have been viewed with some suspicion, particularly by Anglo-Americans. As Moi points out, part of the difficulty here arises from issues of language and terminology. In French the only adjective of the noun ‘femme’ is ‘féminin’, whereas English has the two adjectives ‘female’ and ‘feminine’ in relation to woman. It has been common usage amongst English-speaking feminists for ‘female’ to denote the biological (sex), and ‘feminine’ the cultural (gender).²⁷ This language difference creates additional difficulties for feminists in understanding, in particular, Cixous’ concept of an *écriture féminine*: is such a writing a cultural strategy, for example, or a biological imperative?

Cixous’ own writing is, in fact, fundamentally concerned with issues of language and its power. In particular she seeks to break down binary thought (the organisation of ideas as pairs of oppositions), a “universal battlefield” which both reflects language, and is constructed by it.²⁸ A system of binaries is a battlefield because, she argues, within each pairing one term is always culturally privileged, for example ‘activity’ over ‘passivity’; here the former (associated with the masculine) implies victory, the latter (associated with the feminine), defeat. In this constant struggle for supremacy, Cixous sees death “always at work”.²⁹ She therefore seeks to challenge patriarchal binarism, with its oppressive hierarchies, not simply by privileging the ‘feminine’ term but by opening language to multiplicities of meaning. To this end, Cixous embraces the possibilities of bisexuality, as a form of writing. Such a bisexuality is not, she explains,

the classic conception of bisexuality, which, squashed under the emblem of castration fear and along with the fantasy of a “total” being (though composed of two halves) would do away with [...] difference³⁰ ,

but rather affirms the presence within one’s self of both sexes, “non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex”, a self-permission which allows for a “multiplication of

²⁶ Moi (1991) *op.cit.*, 103.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁸ Cixous (1975b) *op.cit.*, 64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Cixous (1975a) *op.cit.*, 341.

the effects of the inscription of desire", over all parts of the body.³¹ It is in part this belief in the transformative potential of bisexuality which, as I shall show, leads Cixous to a re-visioning of the Oedipus myth: a narrative which has at its centre a sexual union which in itself implies a multiplicity of relationships.

A bisexual writing - an open-ended textuality which disrupts meanings, embraces pluralities and recovers the repressed - is what Cixous implies through her use of the much-contested term *écriture féminine*.³² However, how does this practice translate into the context of theatre? Cixous suggests that a vital element of *écriture féminine* is making space for the Other(s), and states:

I, the author, have to disappear so that you, so other, can appear. My answer has come through writing for the theatre.³³

From my reading of Cixous I infer that the "other" refers less to the spectator - whom she only rarely mentions - than to the characters of the drama. Cixous describes herself not as their inventor, but, characteristically, as a mother whose task is to ease their birth:

I live, inhabited by my characters, who give me the same feelings real people give me, except that they live inside me, I am their home. [...] They are characters full of colour who tell me their lives. I note down everything they say. [...] I listen for their voices, through their conflicts, their encounters, their struggles. ³⁴

Cixous thus represents herself less as playwright than scribe, a role which requires the courage to relinquish the concerns of the ego. This is also paralleled in the task of

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Cixous states that for her the term *écriture féminine* means a particular style of writing "said to be feminine", as opposed to writing that is done by all women, 'naturally', or which cannot be achieved by men. She has also said that she does not even like to use the words 'masculine' and 'feminine', because for her they are artificial terms which perpetuate the hierarchy she seeks to challenge. Moi (1991) *op.cit.*, 108. This being so, it seems perverse to say the least to propose the term in the first place.

³³ Cixous (1988) 'Conversations': in Sellers, Susan ed. (1988) *Writing Differences: Readings From the Seminars of Hélène Cixous*: Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 153.

³⁴ Cixous, quoted in Sellers, Susan (1996) *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love*: Cambridge, Polity Press, 77.

actors, she suggests³⁵, who likewise must allow their bodies to be inhabited by the other, their voices to be a channel for songs as yet unheard.³⁶

It is worth observing, however, that this sense of allowing oneself (as writer or actor) to be 'inhabited' carries with it, perhaps problematically, connotations of passivity: the traditionally feminine role? Elsewhere Cixous has, even more explicitly, described writing as a force to which she must submit:

To be lifted up one morning, snatched off the ground, swung in the air. To be surprised. To find in myself the possibility of the unexpected. [...] What delight! What terror. And I had nothing to do with it, I couldn't help it.³⁷

Toril Moi compares Cixous' account to the well-known (supposed) feminine rape-fantasy, in which the woman is physically overcome and finds delight in the experience, yet is blameless because powerless to resist. This is perhaps complicated still further by Cixous' articulation of writing as something a woman guiltily desires to do - compared explicitly with masturbation³⁸ - but which she knows has been forbidden to her. In my own view, whilst I would accept that Cixous' own writing so spirals in on itself that at times it becomes almost impossible to separate that which she advocates from that which she condemns, it is possible to view this notion of 'submission' in positive terms. It need not be the whole woman who submits, after all, but rather those parts of the self which resist the potential of otherness, of the outsider, of women's creativity. What is sought is not the enforced submission of the writer, or actress, but rather - following Cixous' model of an ideal bisexuality - the *self-permission* which admits the presence of the other within one's self.

A theatrical *écriture féminine*, then, de-emphasises the role of the individual writer - not simply in terms of the creation of multiple characters onstage, but surely also acknowledging theatre as an act of artistic collaboration, a plurality of visions and

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ This conception of the actor's task recalls *Demeter Beneath the Sand*, in which Sartori and Coluccini allow their bodies to become 'possessed' by the archetypal characters they have previously denied.

³⁷ Cixous, quoted in Moi (1991) *op.cit.*, 118.

³⁸ Cixous (1975a) *op.cit.*, 335.

voices. Furthermore, it is of course the case that the language of theatre is visual, aural and physical as well as literary. Although Cixous has not, as far as I am aware, engaged in any detail in her writings with the specificities of theatre as a genre, she does embrace theatre's capacity to convey the living present:

that which remains silent in reality and in literary writing resonates in the theater: the Spoken Word [*'LaParole'*]. Nothing more oral, nothing more naked than this language [*'cette langue'*]. Spoken words. I must write like the burning body speaks: the words delivered by the author to the character must be the same words moulded and given breath by living and thinking lips.³⁹

Morag Shiach has argued that Cixous' emphasis on the living moment, the struggle to escape from reproduction, echoes Antonin Artaud's experiments with his 'theatre of cruelty'.⁴⁰ For both Cixous and Artaud, Shiach suggests, theatre's temporal and bodily dimensions allow the possibility of challenging the dominance of the linguistic and creating meanings not dependent on repetition, stereotype and stability of 'character'.⁴¹ I will return to this issue later to consider how far these aims appear to be realised in practice, in the case of *The Name of Oedipus*.

Cixous suggests, then, that writing for the theatre in many ways supports the project of an *écriture féminine*. Playmaking opens space for the voices of 'others' (in the acts of both writing and staging); the theatre is present and vital; its multi-dimensional qualities - temporal, spatial, physical, aural - suggest a diversity of ways in which linguistic authority might be challenged. In addition, Cixous believes that the theatre is, and always has been, a crucial site for the expression of that which society forbids or

³⁹ Cixous, quoted in Sellers (1996) *op.cit.*, 86.

⁴⁰ Artaud, Antonin (1977) *The Theatre and its Double*: London, John Calder.

⁴¹ Shiach, Morag (1991) *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing*: London, Routledge, 107-109. It is worth noting at this point that in many versions of theatre history, Artaud has been represented almost as a polar opposite of Brecht, the former emphasising immediacy and shock, the latter, distance and judgment. Such a polarisation may well itself be a simplification - and indeed Cixous, as we have seen, argues against binarism - but nevertheless, many feminist theatres have aligned themselves, although not unreservedly, with one or other of the two. Franca Rame, for instance, cites Brecht as a major influence; in addition, as Elaine Aston has noted, many British feminist theatre companies have developed strategies derived from Brecht's theatre. The influence of Artaud is most evident in cultural feminist performance practice, suggests Jill Dolan; this association echoes Shiach's connection of Artaud with Cixous. See Aston, Elaine (1995) *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*: London, Routledge; Dolan, Jill (1994) *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*: Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.

represses, a “marvellous land”⁴² indeed where exploration of this kind is permitted. In ‘The place of Crime, the place of Pardon’, she writes that today

we go as little to the Theatre as to our heart, and what we feel the lack of is going to the heart [...]. We live exterior to ourselves, in a world whose walls are replaced by television screens, which has lost its thickness, its depths, its treasures, and we take the newspaper columns for our thoughts.⁴³

Writing for the theatre is thus for Cixous a journey to the heart - as is *écriture féminine*. I am fascinated that for her this also involves a journey towards myth. As with the Teatro del Sole’s *Demeter Beneath the Sand*, it seems that myth is used to signify depth and substance, hidden treasures, repressed passions, all of which might be excavated by - to quote Cixous - a new and persistent “species of mole”.⁴⁴

In ‘excavating’ the classical Greek myth of Oedipus it is clear that Cixous is taking on a narrative which has very significant and contemporary cultural resonances. Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex is one very well-known association; Jacques Lacan is another key figure of psychoanalysis - one with whose work Cixous is very familiar, and to whom she is often indebted - who has used the myth to illustrate his own perception of key stages of development in the human psyche. In *The Name of Oedipus*, Cixous offers a response to both Freud and Lacan, as well as to Sophocles, as I shall show. Before I examine her play it will be necessary, therefore, to outline some of the principal critical concepts surrounding the myth with which Cixous engages. I shall begin, however, with a brief summary of the myth’s narrative content, following Robert Graves’ account.⁴⁵

Oedipus was the son of Laius and Jocasta, King and Queen of Thebes. To avert fulfilment of the prophecy from the Delphic Oracle that the child would grow up to murder his father and marry his mother, Oedipus was exposed on the mountains as an infant, but was taken in and raised by a shepherd of Corinth. As an adult, Oedipus

⁴² Cixous (1986-7) *op.cit.*, 341.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Cixous, Hélène (1975b) *op.cit.*, 65.

⁴⁵ Graves, Robert (1978b) *The Greek Myths: 2*: Harmondsworth, Penguin, 9-15.

consulted the Oracle about his own future and was told of the prophecy. Not wishing to bring disaster on those whom he believed to be his parents, Oedipus resolved not to return to Corinth. On the road, he met Laius - without knowing the King's identity - and the two fell into a dispute which led to a fight and the latter's death: the fulfilment of the first part of the prophecy. Later, having solved the riddle of the Sphinx⁴⁶, he became King of Thebes, thereby gaining the widow Jocasta's hand in marriage: the fulfilment of the second part of the prophecy. Both Jocasta and Oedipus were ignorant of the full facts of their relationship. When these came to light, Jocasta hanged herself and Oedipus tore out his own eyes.

Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (fifth century BCE) is, states Bernard Knox, "universally recognized as the dramatic masterpiece of the Greek theater".⁴⁷ Whilst the myth was old and would have been well-known to his audience, it was Sophocles' treatment of the material which was new: the playwright's emphasis is not on the actions of Oedipus, his unwitting "violation of the two most formidable taboos observed by almost every human society"⁴⁸, but on his discovery of the truth. From the play's opening, we see Oedipus, as King of Thebes, determined to bring the unknown killer of Laius to justice. Both he and Jocasta believe, independently, that they have escaped the prophecy, or proved it false:

- Jocasta: [M]y son was doomed to kill my husband... my son, poor defenceless thing, he never had a chance to kill his father. They destroyed him first. So much for prophecy. It's neither here nor there.⁴⁹
- Oedipus: But now, all those prophecies I feared - [...] They're nothing, worthless.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ The riddle of the Sphinx is a famous one: "What being, with only one voice, has sometimes two feet, sometimes three, sometimes four, and is weakest when it has the most?" Theban wayfarers who could not answer were devoured on the spot. Oedipus gave the correct answer, which is Man: "because he crawls on all fours as an infant, stands firmly on his two feet in his youth, and leans upon a staff in his old age." *Ibid*, 10.

⁴⁷ Introduction to *Oedipus the King* in Sophocles, trans. Fagles, Robert (1984) *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*: Harmondsworth, Penguin, 131.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 208.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 214.

As the myth and Sophocles' play show, the characters are fatally mistaken. Oedipus may be heroic in his search for the truth about the prophecies and about himself, but ultimately the play reasserts the traditional Greek religious view that human beings are ignorant and that knowledge belongs only to the gods.

Sigmund Freud believed that audiences' continued fascination with *Oedipus the King* could be explained in terms of the particular material by which the contrast between destiny and human will is exemplified, suggesting famously that

[i]t is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so.⁵¹

According to Freud, the tragedy of Oedipus enacts the fulfilment of childhood wishes; the majority of us, he suggests, succeed in detaching our sexual impulses from our mothers and in forgetting our jealousy of our fathers. The way out of the Oedipus complex is, he argued, through fear of the castration complex. The father is perceived by the boy-child as capable of castrating him; hence he abandons his desire for the mother and moves towards identification with his father, with the understanding that eventually he too will occupy this position of power. For the girl-child, the trajectory is less straightforward. Freud theorised that for her the castration complex operates in reverse; she desires a penis, perceives its absence in the mother as a failure of provision, and within her unconscious forms the wish to bear the father a child (a stage of female development which has been referred to, again in mythic terms, as the Electra complex⁵²).⁵³

It is perhaps unsurprising that these theories, underlined by Freud's basic belief that 'anatomy is destiny', have been heavily criticised - and not least by women. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, for example, suggests that 'penis envy' is a reality only

⁵¹ Freud, Sigmund (1965), trans. Strachey, James, *The Interpretation of Dreams*: New York, Avon Books, 296.

⁵² Although the term 'Electra complex' is often attributed to Freud, it actually derives from Jung; as Juliet Mitchell notes, Freud himself rejected the term. Mitchell, Juliet & Rose, Jacqueline eds. (1982) *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*: London, Macmillan, 12-13.

⁵³ Wright, Elizabeth (1987) *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice*: London, Methuen, 14-15.

in so far as it refers to women's resentment of male *social* privilege.⁵⁴ Betty Friedan, in her sixties classic *The Feminine Mystique*, acknowledges Freud's belief that it was "woman's nature to be ruled by man, and her sickness to envy him", but, like de Beauvoir, argues that much of what he regarded as biological and instinctual has been shown by modern research to derive from specific cultural causes.⁵⁵ Cixous herself has much to say on the subject of Freud, and the Oedipus complex in particular. In 'Sorties', she writes that because, for Freud, "[t]he 'fate' of the feminine situation is an effect of an anatomical 'defect'", to subscribe to his beliefs is to participate "in condemning woman to death".⁵⁶ By contrast, Cixous' version of female sexuality is life-affirming; her re-visioning of the Oedipus myth - which emphasises Jocasta's role and celebrates the sexuality of the mother-lover - thus challenges Freud on several counts.

As I have indicated, *The Name of Oedipus* engages not only with Sophocles and Freud, but also with the theories of leading French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whose work has influenced aspects of feminist theory. Particularly significant here is his claim that language structures the social subject. Lacan drew parallels between the infant's entry into language and into society itself, like Freud emphasising the importance of the triadic relationship of father, mother and child. Lacan identifies three 'orders', the Symbolic, Imaginary and Real; these orders are not separate, however, but importantly interconnected. The Symbolic, first of all, is the realm of language and the social. To enter this order, the child must leave the Imaginary, the sphere of narcissistic over-identification both with the mother, and with the child's own self-image in the mirror. Malcolm Bowie notes that these two orders are frequently value-laden; the term Imaginary is often pejorative, suggesting "that the subject is seeking, in a wilful and blameworthy fashion, to remove himself from the flux of becoming", whilst the Symbolic is regarded with admiration as "the realm of movement rather than fixity, and of heterogeneity rather than similarity".⁵⁷ Significantly, Lacan termed the

⁵⁴ Beauvoir, Simone de (1953) *The Second Sex*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

⁵⁵ Friedan, Betty (1965) *The Feminine Mystique*: Harmondsworth, Penguin, 94-97.

⁵⁶ Cixous (1975b) *op.cit.*, 81-82.

⁵⁷ Bowie, Malcolm (1991) *Lacan*: London, Fontana, 92.

authority of the Symbolic 'The-Name-of-the-Father', a 'paternal metaphor' to describe "those agencies that placed enduring restrictions on the infant's desire and threatened to punish, by castration, infringements of their law."⁵⁸

As the passage above implies, Lacan accepts the framework of the Oedipus complex; yet while Freud saw the child's 'Oedipal identifications' as primary, Lacan considered them secondary, serving a 'civilising' function. For Lacan, resistance to entering the Symbolic order - or failure to obey its laws - might lead the subject into the third order, the Real. This realm lies outside the Symbolic, a sphere of "brute existence"⁵⁹, unsymbolisable; its place "stretches from the trauma to the phantasy"⁶⁰. In the terms of the myth, Oedipus' unwitting murder of his father and marriage with his mother represents for Lacan a regression from the necessary, adult sphere of the Symbolic, towards the immaturity of the Imaginary - and with the risk of ultimately descending, in madness, into the Real. Oedipus' act of self-blinding, which for Freud represents castration, for Lacan also signifies the fragmentation and collapse of the communicating subject.

It should be apparent from this account that whilst Lacan's reading of the Oedipus myth differs in some respects from that of Freud, both men have defined the feminine position in terms of lack, inherent deficiency. Fundamental to Freud's understanding of female sexuality was his concept of penis-envy; Lacan's emphasis is less reliant on the biological, but his identification of the female with the Imaginary still positions women as, in a sense, outside society. (Women enter the Symbolic, but within it are - as are men - subject to the law of the Father; Lacan also believed that, for a woman, acceding to the Symbolic order requires the suppression of her own 'feminine' language.) In both cases, the myth is used to demonstrate that rebellion against the father (the masculine) and over-identification with the mother (the feminine) leads to the collapse of the individual subject, and, ultimately, the breakdown of society. For Cixous,

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 108.

⁵⁹ Wright (1987) *op.cit.*, 110.

⁶⁰ Lacan, Jacques (1979) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*: Harmondsworth, Penguin, 60.

whose aim after all is to open the subject to the possibility of erotic and linguistic pluralities in a move towards radical individual and ultimately social transformation, engagement with the Oedipus myth is, potentially, a very powerful act. This re-visioning might fairly be considered a response to the question she uses to open her famous essay 'Aller à la mer', published a year earlier in 1977:

How, as women, can we go to the theatre without lending our complicity to the sadism directed against women, or being asked to assume, in the patriarchal family structure that the theatre reproduces *ad infinitum*, the position of victim?⁶¹

Cixous' *The Name of Oedipus: Song of the Forbidden Body*, directed by Claude Régy, was first presented at the Avignon festival, in the Main Courtyard of the Papal Palace. The piece is actually a dialogue-libretto performed by a cast of singers and actors (the roles of Jocasta and Oedipus are both doubled in this way), to the discordant music of André Boucourechliev.⁶² Other performers represent the Chorus, with one in the role of Tiresias (who here is primarily a member of the Chorus, rather than the soothsayer of Sophocles' drama who predicts Oedipus' end). Cixous rejects the linear development from ignorance to knowledge adopted by Sophocles, focussing rather on issues of language and naming. The performance begins with a confusion of voices crying out fragments of speech, images recalling the fear and pain of separation of mother and child, and of the loss of a lover; following this, Jocasta - represented by both singer and actor - pleads with Oedipus to renounce his name:

Jocasta:	Forget the world Forget the town Forget the time. Do not be someone Today. [...]
Jocasta:	<i>No, Oedipus! Do not be Oedipus, Today, you are not the one They are calling.</i> (NO: 255)

As Shiach notes, taking on the name 'Oedipus' is equated with public duty, obligation

⁶¹ Cixous (1977), trans. Kerslake, Barbara, 'Aller à la mer': in Drain ed. (1995) *op.cit.*, 133.

⁶² Miller, Judith (1985) 'Jean Cocteau and Hélène Cixous: Oedipus': in Redmond, James ed. (1985) *Themes in Drama No.7: 'Drama, Sex and Politics'*: Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 208.

to the city of Thebes, and thus with the mechanisms of separation from Jocasta⁶³ ; acceptance of the name constitutes submission to the determinism of the mythic narrative. In Cixous' drama, Oedipus does listen to the 'call' from his society, and in doing so, gradually becomes deaf to Jocasta. The title of the piece has important resonances here. As Miller notes, 'Le Nom' has a homophonic quality, suggesting both the 'name' and the 'no' (*non*) of Oedipus.⁶⁴ For Cixous, the two are entirely connected: Oedipus' acceptance of his name signals his refusal to cast off the myth, and thus a refusal of his love for Jocasta.

The Name of Oedipus is anti-linear, as I have noted, juxtaposing confrontational scenes in 'the present' with stagings of associative memory. The time frame for the action becomes blurred, with constant switchings of verb tenses in the sung or spoken language; identity is from the beginning presented as fragmented, as characters are split between different performers. These factors make it difficult, therefore, to talk of 'plot' or 'character' in conventional terms. What the audience does witness, in broad terms, is an increasing separation of Oedipus from Jocasta, in the former's move towards acceptance of his name, and all that it signifies. In a central, associative sequence, Jocasta recalls - and the performance stages - their overwhelming desire for each other, which seemed to obliterate time. Upon learning who he is and what he has done, Oedipus retreats in horror into muteness (a substitution for blindness which reflects Cixous' emphasis on the centrality of language). Jocasta, unable to reach him, gradually lets go her hold on life until finally she feels herself embraced by a mysterious being, "not man, not woman" (NO: 318), and welcomes death. At this point, Oedipus enters, having found his voice anew. He has returned to his mother-lover; for him, the old names are dead and buried, and he is "at last prepared to learn a new language, his mother's language not his father's".⁶⁵ As Jocasta is already dead, it seems his realisation has come 'tragically' too late; yet, as he stands there wrestling with words through which the individual identities of himself and Jocasta become

⁶³ Shiach (1991) *op.cit.*, 116.

⁶⁴ Miller (1985) *op.cit.*, 208. Cixous' title also plays upon Lacan's phrase 'The Name of the Father' (*Le Nom du Père*), referred to earlier.

⁶⁵ Freeman, Sandra (1998) 'Bisexuality in Cixous' *Le Nom d'Oedipe*: in *Theatre Research International* Vol.23 No.3, 246.

increasingly blurred, his grief gives way to a growing sensation of her presence within and around his body:

Oedipus: Without possessing you,
 Nor you possessing me,
 I feel you rejoin me
 Elsewhere, at last. (NO: 326)

The play closes with the lines:

Oedipus: And we are entering each other
 My mother,
 My child.
 My flesh is restful here.
 I shall cease to suffer.
 I have forgotten everything.
 I no longer know who is dying. (NO: 326)

This 'narrative' thus concludes with a new union of Oedipus and Jocasta. The two have become one, both male and female, parent and child, joined together in a transcendent state which exists between life and death.

Cixous' re-visioning both engages with, and challenges, several of Freud's and Lacan's hypotheses, as well as countering Sophocles' classic drama with a new emphasis of her own. Whilst *Oedipus the King* positions Oedipus firmly as the central character, Cixous foregrounds Jocasta's role; the resulting effect is not so much that Jocasta dominates, but that her willingness to defy the social receives at least as much emphasis as Oedipus' inability to resist it. By making space for the feminine-maternal and suggesting that to value it opens up the way towards rebirth, rather than to the 'dead end' of patriarchal myth, Cixous challenges both the Freudian and Lacanian models which, she believes, condemn women to negativity in their privileging of the phallus as the organising principle of sexual identity and desire. As she writes, in 'The Laugh of the Medusa':

Castration? Let others toy with it. What's a desire originating from a lack? A pretty meager desire.⁶⁶

Yet what Cixous looks for, and what *The Name of Oedipus* aims to stage at its

⁶⁶ Cixous (1975a) *op.cit.*, 347.

conclusion, is not fundamentally a reassertion of 'woman', but of a bisexuality which transcends categorisation, heralding "a thrilling era of the body".⁶⁷ Before Oedipus' birth, he and Jocasta were one flesh; in this state, incest does not exist, there is no castration, no lack on one side and fear of that lack on the other.⁶⁸ In their adult relationship, Jocasta refuses to accept the authority of those names which attempt to deny, divide and condemn, thus challenging Oedipus' insistence upon origin⁶⁹ :

Jocasta: Father, mother, truth, life, death, fault, debt, wife, truth,
 Husband, king, birth, what man can say which he is?
 It is words that rule. (NO: 295)

Jocasta seeks to persuade Oedipus to refuse the closed linguistic system, the determinism of the myth, which will condemn them both. However, Oedipus' submission to his name, and to the call of 'the city', represents acceptance of the Symbolic order. The impasse that develops between Oedipus and Jocasta seems thus to signal the impossibility of avoiding names. The way in which Cixous has chosen to *conclude* the drama is thus, in a sense, utopian.

As I have described, immediately following Jocasta's death, Oedipus returns "[f]rom among the words. From among the dead" (NO: 320)⁷⁰ - from the tyranny of the Symbolic - because his bond with her is so strong that without her he *has* no identity. The joining of the two of them, within the body of Oedipus, signals a form of rebirth for an Oedipus-in-progress, a body in the act of becoming. This Oedipus is, importantly, Cixous' invention: a projected possibility rather than a livable reality. This echoes her descriptions of *écriture féminine*; 'The Laugh of the Medusa' begins with

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 346.

⁶⁸ Freeman, Sandra (1998) *op.cit.*, 244.

⁶⁹ In 'Castration or Decapitation?' (1981), Cixous uses this aspect of the Oedipus myth to relate to the unconscious, and to the practice of *écriture féminine*: "The quest for origins, illustrated by Oedipus, doesn't haunt a feminine unconscious. Rather it's the beginning, or beginnings, the manner of beginning, not promptly with the phallus in order to close with the phallus, but starting on all sides at once, that makes a feminine writing." In Eagleton, Mary ed. (1997) *Feminist Literary Theory*: Oxford, Blackwell, 324-325.

⁷⁰ Oedipus' words relate very directly to a passage from 'Sorties', where Cixous suggests that women have the capacity to undermine the conceptual foundations of culture "[w]hen they wake up from among the dead, from among words, from among laws". Cixous (1975b) *op.cit.*, 65.

the words: "I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*" (her italics).⁷¹ In both cases, the emphasis is on an imagined future. Cixous' re-visioning invites the possibility of a radical transformation of language, a collapse of binary oppositions, a redefinition of sexuality. It is perhaps an irony that these are only possible, it seems, through the death of Jocasta. In a recent essay, Charlotte Canning expresses her own concern over this point:

[I]t is difficult to reconcile "the new being" with the physically male body it inhabits and with the dead woman in his arms. In fact, the new being looks suspiciously like the old being.⁷²

Cixous' choice here could be read as a decision on her part to work with the events of the myth more or less as they stand, whilst offering her own interpretation of the effect that the powerful bond between the two of them might have. There is certainly no intention on Cixous' part of recasting Jocasta as a feminist heroine; she is left rather, as Shiach has commented, "as the point of resistance in a structure of symbolic and political violence".⁷³

The Name of Oedipus offers a fascinating exploration, through performance, of Cixous' continued preoccupations with language, gender, myth and power. If it is to be considered a piece of feminist theatre, however, it is not without its problems. Admittedly, as I have pointed out, Cixous herself resists the term 'feminism', but that is because she associates it with the demand for social inclusion rather than social transformation; this is therefore a very limited interpretation of feminism as a project, and certainly her work falls within Rita Felski's broad definition of the term⁷⁴, and within my own.

A significant issue for me is that whilst Cixous' text offers a provocative

⁷¹ Cixous (1975a) *op.cit.*, 334. Criticisms of *écriture féminine* at times seem to come from a failure to recognise that Cixous envisions this practice as a future possibility rather than a description of how women currently, 'naturally', write.

⁷² Canning, Charlotte (1999) 'The Critic as Playwright: Performing Hélène Cixous' *Le Nom d'Oedipe*: in Jacobus, Lee & Barreca, Regina eds. (1999) *Hélène Cixous: Critical Impressions*: Amsterdam, Gordon & Breach, 312.

⁷³ Shiach (1991) *op.cit.*, 120.

⁷⁴ Felski (1989) *op.cit.*, 14.

reinterpretation of the Oedipus myth, and one which responds critically to established readings which have aligned the feminine as problematically outside of culture, it is unclear how her vision of a future might come to pass in reality. In this sense, it remains no more than a metaphor. Metaphors can of course be powerful; a transformation of language might indeed lead to the transformation of society, yet as we exist *within* society (and this includes women, as Cixous refuses any positioning of woman as outside it), how can this be effected? The new being and new language that we are offered at the end of *The Name of Oedipus* is not represented as (in Lacanian terms) a return to the Imaginary, nor a descent into the trauma of the Real; rather, a counter-Symbolic is proposed. In other words, Cixous' vision is neither one of feminine inclusion, nor of a separate feminine realm, but of a total and non-exclusive system of language (and thus of thought), radically transformed by the powers of the 'feminine' (which for Cixous, as we have seen, does not equal 'female'). To connect this vision with Felski's model of the feminist counter-public sphere, then, it seems that what Cixous desires is a feminist (or feminine) counter-Symbolic sphere.

Like the feminist counter-public sphere, what I am terming Cixous' 'counter-Symbolic' is not without its tensions and, indeed, contradictions. Women have a key role to play, she suggests, in leading the way to the return of the 'feminine', because their voices and bodies have for so long been denied. In a typical passage from 'Sorties', she describes the violence of society's exclusion of women:

We, coming early to culture, repressed and choked by it, our beautiful mouths stopped up with gags, pollen, and short breaths; we the labyrinths, we the ladders, we the trampled spaces [...]⁷⁵

Cixous urges women to write, to speak, to reclaim their despised and feared bodies with delight, yet there is rarely in her own writing any identification or analysis of the material factors which might prevent women from doing this. As a result, I find myself in some sympathy with Toril Moi when she acknowledges Cixous' vision as "stirring and seductive", but comments that nevertheless it says

nothing of the actual inequities, deprivations and violations that women, as

⁷⁵ Cixous (1975b) *op.cit.*, 69.

social beings rather than as mythological archetypes, must constantly suffer.⁷⁶

The symbolic coming together of Oedipus and Jocasta in the last scene of *The Name of Oedipus* is presented not simply as an overcoming of the barriers between these two, but as a joining with the power to heal the world (NO: 325); this would seem to imply a concern on Cixous' part to look beyond the individual to a wider community.

However, as the union has been achieved explicitly by turning away from the city, it seems to me that her conclusion is essentially inward-looking; ultimately, the play offers no reconciliation of the psychological and the social.

As I have previously discussed, the approaches to writing associated with certain of the 'French feminists' can perhaps be criticised for an over-emphasis on the radical possibilities of sophisticated aesthetic strategies, at the expense of attention to material realities and contextual issues. Whilst clearly I do not believe that re-visioning of myth as a feminist strategy need be élitist *per se*, I do consider that some of Cixous's work is open to charges of exclusivity. Her non-dramatic writings, such as 'Sorties', are intended as explicitly anti-theoretical; whilst they may be unconventional in theoretical terms, being non-linear, metaphorical and poetic, they nevertheless weave a dense web of cultural - and especially mythical - references which can be fully accessible only to a fairly specialised readership. As a text for performance, *The Name of Oedipus* is, perhaps, inevitably, less complex. Its linguistic effect does not derive from forms of speech/song which are really radically unlike conventional patterns, but is rather achieved by what seem to me fairly straightforward strategies of repetition and wordplay. To this extent, then, this is a text which to me seems potentially fairly accessible⁷⁷, although knowledge of Sophocles, Freud, Lacan and Cixous' own complex (and shifting) positions on language and power would certainly facilitate a deeper level of appreciation.

⁷⁶ Moi (1991) *op.cit.*, 123.

⁷⁷ Susan Sellers has expressed the view, although not referring to *The Name of Oedipus* in particular, that Cixous' theatre writing is generally more accessible to the spectator than her non-dramatic writings are to the reader. She backs this up by suggesting that Cixous' plays are (necessarily?) more formally organised than her fiction, that physicalised characters illustrate perspectives with greater clarity, and that the use of spoken poetry, metaphor and song "work against the recuperation and closure that Cixous condemns". Sellers' position is thus that Cixous' drama is more 'user-friendly' than her other writing. Sellers (1996) *op.cit.*, 92-93.

However, I am left uncertain as to how far Cixous' particular vision, in *The Name of Oedipus*, would be effectively communicated to a general audience. This is in part because, judging by the written text and by the limited information available about the original production, little use was made of the full resources of theatre; the piece was presented, it seems, almost more as an oratorio than as an opera. Despite Cixous' critical emphasis on 'writing the body' (emphasised in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' and 'Sorties'), it is unclear how far she is concerned with the actual physicality of the performers onstage. The text's final proposition, an androgynous being in which the two forces of Oedipus and Jocasta have combined in a plurality of erotic and linguistic possibilities, is indicated through speech and song (by the male performers in the role of Oedipus) rather than through physical action or imagery. For Cixous, the verbal may be of primary importance; nonetheless, and given that the text's language is not strikingly 'transformed', the performance appears more to talk about a possible future than to reveal it to the audience. Cixous' text could, of course, be staged in ways which make far greater use of the physical. Charlotte Canning describes a production of *The Name of Oedipus* at the Yale School of Drama in 1991, which, it would appear, made good use of theatre's resources. This staging, for which Canning acted as 'text consultant', explored the signifying possibilities of cross-race doubling⁷⁸, stylised physicality and a richly layered performance environment.⁷⁹

Cixous' text is thus open to the possibilities of a radical staging, but as it stands I feel that its subtitle *Song of the Forbidden Body* is perhaps ironically apt: this is a song of an imagined future rather than a revelation of it, and the body exists more as a concept

⁷⁸ Canning suggests that the cross-race casting, along with a new musical score which drew on the heritage of African-American music, "unmoored the play from its relentlessly white European roots". Canning (1999) *op.cit.*, 314.

⁷⁹ Canning describes a set where the stage "sloped gently away from the audience and into a pool of water", within which was a small chaise-longue, a miniature of another (shaped in metal and mesh) which stood on the ground, downstage right. 'Repetition with difference' was also a theme within the costumes, which in some cases were more structure than clothes; for example, speaking Jocasta was dressed as a bride in a costume both elaborate and severely restricting, whilst singing Jocasta wore a metal corset which "made what was implied in speaking Jocasta's costume literal". *Ibid*, 315-317. There are some similarities here, it seems to me, with the Teatro del Sole's *Demeter Beneath the Sand*; the 'civilised' furniture half-submerged in water reflects the rocking chair in the sand, and both performances make use of white costumes which are partly removed to expose something starker or more skeletal.

than as the “burning” being of whom she writes.⁸⁰ However, whilst *The Name of Oedipus* is clearly an important text to study in relation to Cixous’ re-visioning of myth, it may be doing the author an injustice to criticise the piece as if it were typical of her work for the theatre. Cixous’ association with Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil, which began in the 1980s, has clearly developed her experience as a playwright and extended her awareness of the potential of theatre’s physical as well as verbal languages. The Théâtre du Soleil have, for example, increasingly used the term *écriture corporelle* (bodily writing) to refer to the actor’s task in performance, a description which might owe something to Cixous’ concept of an *écriture féminine*, but one which emphasises the physicality of the actor on stage in a way that Cixous’ earlier writings for the theatre did not.⁸¹ As far as I am aware, Cixous has not yet extended her involvement with theatre to the point of intervention in the process of direction, although she certainly is an avid watcher of rehearsals, but she has increasingly advocated the theatrical form as a way forward for her own writing process.⁸²

As a re-visioning of myth, *The Name of Oedipus* represents a complex intellectual project which in my view invites analysis (this is despite the fact that the author herself claims to reject feminist analytical discourses). Cixous’ response to the myth’s themes of patricide and incestuous love is articulated through richly poetical language and sophisticated wordplay; however, the body, I have suggested, remains contained rather than released within the limits of this exploration. In re-visioning *this* myth, in particular, Cixous sees herself as mining its buried energies and using these to infiltrate the patriarchal structures erected on the myth’s foundations; this is a myth whose meaning, for Cixous, lies not in the artificial dualities of masculine/feminine, parent/child, permitted/forbidden, but in the promise of the collapse of such divisive boundaries.

⁸⁰ Cixous, quoted in Sellers (1996) *op.cit.*, 86.

⁸¹ Bryant-Bertail, Sarah (1999) ‘*Écriture corporelle* and the body politic: *Les Atrides*’: in Williams, David ed. (1999) *Collaborative Theatre: The Théâtre du Soleil Sourcebook*: London, Routledge, 179-185.

⁸² Dobson, Julia (1998) ‘The Scene of Writing: The Representation of Poetic Identity in Cixous’ Recent Theatre’: in *Theatre Research International* Vol.23 No.3, 256.

Conclusion

In the introduction to this thesis I proposed that feminist re-visioning of myth seeks, fundamentally, to enter familiar stories from new critical directions. The products of the re-visioning process vary, from reinterpretations and deconstructions, to subversions or outright rejections of the 'original' (i.e. the dominant) narrative. In every case, however, there is an intention to expose the structures of power embedded within these tales and their contexts of telling, which effectively perpetuate traditional hierarchies of gender relations. The range of examples I have considered within this study represents a multiplicity of theatrical possibilities and sociocultural perspectives. Given that the work I discuss has been drawn from a far larger available pool of plays and projects, I hope it will be evident that this practice of re-visioning myth in feminist theatre is rich, varied and - far from being a dwelling on the past - very much alive and rooted in the present.

The work I have examined proposes a whole series of alternative worlds, staged fantasies where - in Carter's terms - it seems that anything is possible, yet the playwrights as individuals do offer quite distinct (re)visions which the organisation of this study has tried to reveal. Inherent in this practice of feminist re-vision is an interweaving of a mythical otherworld with contemporary social reality; the resulting textures, however, vary considerably. At one end of the scale are plays motivated by the urgent need for societal change, in which myth operates as a pretext for an examination (and a raising of public awareness) of pressing social issues. I have argued that Daniels' *Neoptide*, for example, fits this pattern. Furthermore, in this play the myth essentially operates subtextually; the Demeter narrative provides an additional level of meaning, but this is ultimately subordinate to the playwright's focus on injustice and prejudice within a contemporary context. At the other end of the scale are projects which, in their willing embrace of fictional roles within a mythical sphere, may appear somewhat disengaged from the everyday struggles of real women in society. Cixous' *The Name of Oedipus* comes into this category, I suggest. The author's utilisation of myth as a channel into psychological and linguistic alternatives has the positive aim of

interrogating the role of myth at the deep level of consciousness-formation, but the negative effect of inviting charges of obscurantism and the evasion of material issues.

If my claim that *Neptune* emphasises the social at the expense of the mythical, and *The Name of Oedipus* the psychological at the expense of the material, can itself be challenged - as of course it can - it is equally the case that the other plays I discuss could be very differently interpreted and arranged. Nevertheless, I believe that the shift between the social and the psychological which my thesis has represented is a genuine one, and reflects contrasting purposes within the broad project of feminist re-vision. Such a contrast arguably reveals potential or actual conflicts/contradictions within feminism itself, but I have tried to show, through an application of Felski's approach, that these two emphases can be regarded as complementary rather than oppositional. The diversity of feminist activity can be read through the model of the counter-public sphere, given that feminism aims to effect change at all levels of social and psychological operation, at some moments necessarily speaking directly and solely to women, and at others addressing society as a whole. The practice of re-vision reflects this wider feminist frame; as I have shown, reworkings of myth may seek to challenge the expectations and expose the prejudices of a mainstream audience, or to nurture, affirm and celebrate an oppositional identity within a community of interest. Similarly, feminism and feminist re-visioning must engage practically with the immediate problems of social inequities (and their political reinforcement), but also be allowed the freedom to explore new ground intellectually, emotionally, sexually, aesthetically.

Whilst my thesis structure has been organised to draw attention to perceived similarities in the aim and emphasis of individual plays, it is also helpful to imagine a grouping along chronological lines. Here again, Felski's model provides a useful frame. A *Thread in the Dark* is a pre-feminist work; Haasse's perspective is essentially humanist, although her focus on the choices made by Ariadne and Phaedra suggests that women have a crucial role to play within the traditionally male-dominated public sphere of government. *Rites*, a decade later, examines constraints on women's opportunities and the danger of gender stereotyping. Duffy voices an emergent feminism, and

appropriately her characters are not yet aware of the extent of their own false consciousness. The plays of Rame, Carter, Chedid and Cixous that I have discussed all date from the 1970s (although I have referred, additionally, to more recent productions): a key period of development for second-wave feminism. The first three playwrights offer, broadly speaking, a socialist feminist analysis which argues for a widespread transformation of social and economic structures and, within this, a re-visioning of gender relations. By contrast, Cixous urges the release of individual female energies which, she argues, will provoke a transformation of consciousness and thus of social systems.

The examples I have included from Daniels, Churchill and Lan, Wertenbaker and the Teatro del Sole are all rooted in the 1980s. These plays are very varied, thematically and stylistically, which could be regarded as evidence of a blossoming of artistic strategies, or alternatively as symptomatic of fragmentation within the feminist movement. In my view, *Neaptide*, *A Mouthful of Birds* and *The Love of the Nightingale* are united in their struggle to articulate a feminist vision within a mainstream context, where reviewers are ready to criticise work which focuses on the oppression of women as at best narrow, and at worst strident or hysterical. By contrast, *Demeter Beneath the Sand* was presented on the theatrical fringe. For this audience, I suggest, feminism need not be packaged as a message to be championed or rejected, but can be accepted as a learning process; equally, performance is understood to be a method, not simply a product to be judged. This comparison between the first three plays and the fourth draws attention to the continuing problem for women playwrights (and for minority groups more generally) of gaining recognition and understanding, and of influencing theatre practice in the widest sense. The model of the feminist counter-public sphere illustrates the tension, and can offer no easy solution; rather, the model reemphasises that feminism's aims are not single but multiple, and that its strategies must likewise be flexible and diverse.

The plays I have discussed are similarly complex in their treatments of myth. In Chapter One I drew attention to the seemingly contradictory definitions of myth as

sacred truth, on the one hand, and false universal, on the other. Feminist theatre has explored myth in both of these senses, and offered a variety of responses. Several of the plays discussed have sought to reveal the ideological bases of mythic narratives, expose abuses of power and demythologise gender relations, or alternatively propose persuasive counter-myths; if myth has long been a secret weapon in the armoury of the patriarchy, its construction and use must be revealed and challenged. By contrast, other work examined has embraced the idea that myths might be conveyors of truths; an overlay of distortions and misuses must first be stripped away, but if this is done we can reach a pre-enlightenment territory of repressed power, ready to be unleashed. As I have discussed, this latter approach, in particular, has proved controversial. Critics have challenged the viability of appropriating mythological archetypes and narratives as weapons for feminist use, without simultaneously subscribing to an identification of the feminine as itself 'essentially' irrational.

In my discussions of specific plays I have tried to bring out the limitations of the work, as well as its achievements and aspirations. What is very clear is that challenging myths supported by the dominant ideology must necessarily be a difficult and ongoing struggle, whatever approach is chosen, and that these playwrights have explored a wide variety of strategies to loosen the stranglehold of narratives and images which are supported more by faith, tradition and fear than by reason. Haasse, first of all, has attempted to shake the hold of myth by dragging it into the light, peeling away layers of deception, forcing its exposure. She attempts to shine a searchlight into the labyrinth, by extension inviting each member of her audience to examine their own choices and motives. Rame's approach is less righteous, and more comic. This does not mean that she is any less serious in her intention to reveal social hypocrisies, and with *Medea*, in particular, she offers a frightening vision of the future we will see, if women's rights as equal citizens are not acknowledged. Finally in Chapter Two, Daniels' *Neaptide* offers flight from the traditional ending to the myth as the plays's conclusion. Claire and Poppy have no future in British society as it is, and so disappear altogether, as completely as if they had themselves vanished into the myth's own underworld.

The re-visionings of the Bacchae myth discussed in Chapter Three approach this narrative of female violence in contrasting ways. Duffy creates a blackly humorous, nightmare distortion of 'reality'; where Rame's *Medea* offers a vision of the future, *Rites* hints that women's vengeance might be an actuality of the present day, hidden from male eyes. Churchill and Lan provocatively suggest that violence might be a valid expression of women's repressed energies, and re-vision Pentheus' 'humiliation' by Dionysus as a positive route towards a shedding of male stereotypes. Wertenbaker weaves contrasting myths and theatrical traditions together, in a radical questioning of institutionalised power and individual responsibility. Of all the plays I have discussed, Chedid's *The Goddess Lar* perhaps goes furthest in confronting the allure of myth, challenging women's complicity in perpetuating romanticised self-images. Carter also explores this theme, within the same chapter, and is ready to offer her own provocative new models to replace the virgins, vamps and victims her re-visionings have sought to deconstruct. Sartori and Coluccini, considered in Chapter Five, perhaps offer less radical a vision than some, since they appear to represent women as almost at the mercy of the archetypes who possess them; however, their use of myths offers a vivid, highly physical expression of women's repression under patriarchy and the forces of a potential resistance. Finally, Cixous's treatment of the Oedipus myth seeks to challenge its hold by blurring all boundaries, between acceptability and taboo, masculine and feminine, the Symbolic and Imaginary, history and myth; her vision is radical, even if her theatre, arguably, has not found the means to embody it.

In researching and writing this study, I have been continually struck by the richness of all of this material, its layers, textures, intertextualities and resonances. I came to the subject through a fascination with tales and tale-telling - written and oral - as much as with theatre. I soon discovered that re-visioning of myth was a strategy repeatedly adopted by feminist playwrights, but not one that had previously been subjected to systematic analysis. My aim has been to fill this gap by providing just such an analytical overview, to draw attention to the re-visioning of myth as a recurrent theme within feminist theatre, to explore the range of motivations behind this as a strategy, and ultimately to evaluate the achievements of the plays themselves. As I have already

stated, what I have written is in no sense offered as the last word on the subject; it could not be, since the practice itself is continually changing and evolving, in the forms both of new writing, and of new productions and adaptations of existing texts. What I have tried to do, however, is to provide insight into one, specific way in which feminist playwrights have sought to articulate their sense of the society and culture of which they are a part, to deconstruct its operations and manipulations, and envision radical alternatives.

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